

**President Obama Wants Change – How Educators Can Help
To Form a Real Global Society**

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Abstract:

“Do nothing and all things will be done,” or “Wait, time heals all wounds” may have been sound advice of the past for some distant, sparsely populated island. But failing to address economic issues and not providing health care for the sick were putting America on the verge of financial collapse and making it a land where people had to choose between the procurement of food or medicine. It was at the eleventh hour that a young senator, Barack Obama, emerged on the scene with a vision of change for this country. Through a hard-fought campaign, America would embrace his well-conceived plan for change and make him the first African American president of the United States of America. His plan purports to restore this country to a state of glory for which it has long been recognized - “the home of the free, the land of the brave.” President Obama crafted a broad-based plan of change for the country to impact every major sector of society. He wants peace to replace war, an economy that provides jobs, health care that brings relief to all Americans and education that is effective from preschool to college. This paper moves from Obama’s general vision for the country to more specific attention to his detailed plan for education. A review of literature is conducted to validate the merit of his plan. With a refined agenda, educators are called upon to embrace it and make ready for its implementation. The final charge is to focus attention on strategies for imparting quality education to students around the world.

Introduction

It is no mistake that America is in a crisis. People are desperate for change and President Obama is prepared to lead the nation to greener pastures. His vision for education holds tremendous promise; however, educators must accept responsibility for refining and implementing plans to realize the vision. In essence, educators must step to the plate and do what they best know to do – provide all students with an education that will develop their potential to the fullest and serve the greater good of humanity.

As change to society is contemplated, thought must be given to the role that education is to play. It is very important that political leaders, businessmen, and persons in all other sectors realize that the quality of life in a country is much dependent on the quality of its educational system. It is stimulating to know that President Barack Obama is making education a priority in America.

Former President Clinton pointed out that over the course of history, students and universities have played important, often transformative roles in guiding all people toward a healthier, more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous global community. To tap into today's generation of students' enthusiasm, optimism, and passion for change, the Clinton Global Initiative University, a nonpartisan extension of the Clinton Global Initiative, reaches across campuses to engage young people and educational institutions in confronting the challenges and in taking concrete steps to solve them. CGI is about working urgently together to transform problems into opportunities, across lines of geography, politics, ethnicity, religion, and gender (Clinton, 2008). Such effort makes for a firm foundation for Obama to launch a renewed emphasis on education.

This paper explores the broad issues that President Obama purports to tackle during his term of office and more specifically, examine his plan for education. Effort is made to lay his plan along side the best thoughts of educators and other leaders as contained in education reform literature to corroborate the merit of the plan. To further inform the general community, information is provided on how to take education to a new level in America and abroad. It appears that untold opportunities exist for the advancement of education and now is the time for all constituents to make it happen.

Obama's overall menu for change

To say that President Obama's plan for America is ambitious, is an understatement; it is monumental. In his inaugural address, he pointed out that America is in the midst of crisis – it is at war, the economy is badly weakened, homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered, health care is too costly, schools fail too many, energy is used to strengthen adversaries and threaten the planet, and there is fear that the country's decline is inevitable and that the next generation must lower its sights. To get on course, he thinks it is time to reaffirm an enduring spirit, to carry forward the precious gift that all are free and deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness, and to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America. His goals are: to create new jobs and lay a new foundation for growth; build roads, bridges and electric grids and digital lines that feed commerce and bind people together; to restore science to its rightful place and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost; to harness the sun, the wind, and the soil to fuel cars and run factories; and to transform schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. The President's strategies for accomplishing these ambitions are: begin to

responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan, work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, roll back the specter of a warming planet, not apologize for the country's way of life nor waver in its defense, and say to those who seek to advance terror, America will defeat you. He also wants the country to be shaped by every language and culture, a common humanity to reveal itself, America to play its role in ushering in a new era of peace, and that it be said that the country carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations (Associated Press, 2009).

Obama-Biden education plan

As incorporated in President Obama's inaugural address, the Obama-Biden big picture for education is to transform schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. Their vision for a 21st century education entails demanding more reform and accountability, coupled with the resources needed to carry out that reform; asking parents to take responsibility for their children's success; and recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers to fill new successful schools that prepare children for success in college and the workforce. The Obama-Biden plan (2009) purports to restore the promise of America's public education and ensure that American children again lead the world in achievement, creativity and success. Specific areas of emphasis and corresponding objectives for their education plan are:

Early Childhood Education

Zero to five plan

- Provide critical support to young children and their parents
- Place key emphasis on early care and education for infants

- Create early learning challenge grants to promote state zero to five efforts and help states move toward voluntary, universal pre-school

Expand early head start and head start

- Quadruple early head start
- Increase head start funding
- Improve quality for both

Provide affordable, high-quality child care

- Increase access to affordable and high-quality child care to ease the burden on working families

K-12

Reform No Child Left Behind

- Start by funding the law
- Improve the assessments used to track student progress
- Improve NCLB's accountability system

Support high-quality schools and close low-performing charter schools

- Double funding for the Federal Charter School Program
- Allow for interventions in struggling charter schools
- Have a clear process for closing underperforming charter schools

Make math and science education a national priority

- Recruit math and science degree graduates to the teaching profession
- Ensure that all children have access to a strong science curriculum

Address the dropout crisis

- Pass legislation to provide funding to school districts to invest in intervention strategies, e.g., extended learning time

Expand high-quality afterschool opportunities

- Double funding for afterschool programs, e.g., the 21st Century Learning Centers

Support college outreach programs

- Support outreach programs like GEAR UP, TRIO and Upward Bound

Support college credit initiatives

- Create a national “Make College A Reality” initiative
- Increase students taking AP or college-level classes nationwide

Support English language learners

- Support transitional bilingual education
- Help Limited English Proficient students get ahead

Recruit teachers

- Create new Teacher Service Scholarships
- Include high-quality alternative programs for mid-career recruits

Prepare teachers

- Require all schools of education to be accredited
- Create a voluntary national performance assessment
- Create Teacher Residency Programs

Retain teachers

- Expand mentoring programs
- Provide incentives to give teachers paid common planning time

Reward teachers

- Promote new and innovative ways to increase teacher pay that are developed with teachers
- Design programs that reward accomplished educators who serve as mentors
- Reward teachers who work in underserved places
- Value and reward teachers who consistently excel in the classroom

Higher Education

Create the American opportunity tax credit

- Make college affordable for all Americans by creating a new American Opportunity Tax Credit (recipients will be required to conduct 100 hours of community service)

Simplify the application process for financial aid

- Streamline the financial aid process by eliminating the current federal financial aid application (The Obama-Biden plan, 2009).

A cursory review by number of entries indicates that there is considerable emphasis at the zero to five age group, extensive emphasis at the K-12 age group, and limited emphasis at the higher education level. Though it should be noted that the specific items listed do not necessarily warrant equal weight. For example, making college affordable heavily influences whether or not a student completes a four-year degree program.

A research-based education agenda

Hewitt (2008) observed that since the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” American education has been in a perpetual state of rolling crisis and reform. He thought

the report had a major impact, at least in the continuing development of federal influence, but in terms of the curriculum, its impact on schools and schooling is an illusion.

Here, an examination is made of what is reported to be four major educational reforms in American education (three are documented and the fourth is proposed) and a number of complementary developments and issues. The developments and issues include a progressive education agenda, the P-16 reform, educational inequity, and post secondary matters.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2008) provided a historical perspective of education reform in America in terms of “Ways,” one through four. The First Way was categorized as the welfare state, which in the United States culminated in the Great Society initiatives of the 1960s. The authors’ assessment was that these policies provided unprecedented levels of support for the poor, but they also fostered long-term state dependency without providing any real foundation for long-term civic engagement. They felt that in education, the Third Way fostered innovation but also allowed unacceptable variations in quality. The Second Way is dubbed as the time when the pendulum swung back. The antitax governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher cut many social services and outsourced others to the private sector. The authors’ thinking was that these reforms reduced costs and dependency and encouraged entrepreneurial drive and individual responsibility, but they also undermined social cohesion and widened the gaps between rich and poor. They felt that in education, the Second Way manifested itself in increased regulation by the market and the state, leading to a collapse of professional motivation and crises of teacher retention and leadership renewal. High-stakes standardization, driven by government performance targets, sucked the passion and pleasure out of

teaching and increased the workload and vulnerability of education leaders. The authors thought that the Third Way, endorsed by Clinton and Blair, offered something between and beyond the first two. It called for increased support for public services in terms of financial resources, buildings, materials, and training. They felt that in education, it proposed a mixed economy of diverse providers, leading to the increasing prominence of charter schools in the United States and specialist schools in the United Kingdom. The authors' evaluation of the Third Way was, there has been an encouraging growth of professional communities and networks in which educators and schools share knowledge and help one another improve, thus injecting lateral energy into the system. They believe that these are good things. But there have been disturbing developments, too. A new kind of autocratic and all-seeing state has emerged – one that enforces inflexible government mandates, such as NCLB's adequate yearly progress goals. Although bottom-up support and lateral networks have had some success in securing short-term test gains, the political culture of high-stakes testing is undermining longer-term, more innovative efforts. Their summation of these three ways was: The First Way of the welfare state had a sense of mission and showed the value of innovation but resulted in too much variation in quality and implementation. The Second Way of markets and standardization provided urgency, consistency, and direction, but at great cost to professional motivation, authentic achievement, and curriculum creativity. The Third Way has increased levels of support and added lateral professional energy but subjected teachers to a frantic and frenetic pursuit of arbitrary improvement targets. Each way had strengths in some areas but enormous limitations in others.

Based on noted strengths and weaknesses of the three earlier ways of reform, Hargreaves and Shirley (2008) proposed a Fourth Way of change—informed by an effort to identify and learn from the best of the past, enlightened by high-performance exemplars like Finland in the present, and inspired by a commitment to more innovative and inclusive goals for the future. The Fourth Way would rest on five pillars of purpose and partnership, three principles of professionalism, and four catalysts of coherence. The **pillars of purpose are as follows:**

- an inspiring and inclusive vision - that draws people together in pursuit of an uplifting common purpose
- deepened public engagement – power of community organizing
- achievement through increased investment in education facilities and other social services
- corporate educational responsibility – education and business partners
- students as partners in change – more involved in their own learning.

Believing that education leaders and teachers are the ultimate arbiters of change, the authors propose **principles of professionalism as follows:**

- high-quality teachers – trained to a rigorous intellectual and practical standard
- powerful professionalism – teachers’ associations become profound agents of systemic change that benefits students
- lively learning communities – teachers learn and improve together in cultures of collaboration, trust, and responsibility.

Noting the importance of bringing diverse people together to work skillfully and effectively for a common cause, the authors provide **catalysts of coherence** as follows:

- sustainable leadership – identifying and developing aspiring and emerging leaders; reducing unnecessary demand - eliminating the excessive reform demands that deter many qualified potential leaders
- networks of mutual learning – schools must support and learn from one another, become collectively responsible for all the children, and commit to systems and dispositions where the strong help the weak
- responsibility before accountability – give a higher priority to collective professional responsibility than to external accountability
- building from the bottom, steering from the top – provide a broad and inspired sense of direction; positive change should emerge and spread from below rather than being dictated from the top (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008).

In terms of current status, one report, *Getting smarter, becoming fairer; A progressive education agenda for a stronger nation* (Brown, Rocha, Sharkey, Hadley, Handley & Kronley, 2005), stated that America needs a progressive vision for public education which ensures that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Building on this vision, the “Renewing our schools, securing our future national education task force,” which is cosponsored by the Institute for America’s Future and the Center for American Progress, crafted a comprehensive plan to revitalize education in America. As a preamble to the report, the task force noted that America faces a newly globalized economy, rapidly changing demographics and a lingering and dangerous achievement gap for minority and poor students that continues to sap America’s strength by failing to give all children the tools they require to become the highly skilled workforce and engaged citizenry that the country needs. Their report lays out a road map for creating a

public education system capable of meeting the challenges that the country faces. The principal challenges are globalization and competitiveness (too many students are not prepared to thrive in this increasingly competitive world) and achievement gap (the gaps between “haves” and “have-nots,” the latter being minority and poor students, continue to be huge on almost every measure of health, income, and achievement; these gaps stifle economic growth and endanger our democracy). To meet these challenges, the task force came up with recommendations as follows:

- More and better use of learning time (extending the school day, lengthening and/or reorganizing the school year and making better use of existing time in school; providing pre-school and full-day kindergarten; preparing all high-school students for higher education and connecting them to affordable post-secondary opportunities).
- High expectations, voluntary national standards and accountability for all students’ learning (developing voluntary national standards, expanding national accountability measures and pressing for adequate and equitable funding across states; increasing assistance to low-performing schools and districts and promoting school construction and modernization).
- Highly qualified teachers for every classroom and strong, effective leaders for every school (developing better teacher and principal preparation and training, enhanced compensation structures, and a more equitable distribution of highly skilled teachers).
- Connecting schools with families and communities (establishing community schools to address out-of-school needs, offering early screening to identify

developmental and physical challenges, promoting home visits and support for struggling families, and encouraging greater parental involvement in children's education - Brown, Rocha, Sharkey, Hadley, Handley & Kronley, 2005).

In terms of organizational structure, the education reform known as P-16 is intended to provide greater continuity to students' entire school career and entry into the work force. To do so involves enhancing preparation for college through a rigorous high school curriculum, aligning high school graduation requirements with postsecondary admissions requirements, and strengthening teacher preparation programs and professional development for veteran instructors so that every classroom has a highly qualified teacher. Other activities include the provision of high-quality preschool programs for all children, an expanded range of course offerings at the high school level, enhanced collaboration among teachers at all educational levels, high levels of parent and community involvement in schools, and smoother transitions between educational levels.. New efforts include the creation and implementation of P-16 or P-20 data systems that have been designed to track student achievement from early childhood all the way into the work force. Typically, the goals of P-16 systems include reducing achievement gaps and better preparing students for all levels of education. One component that, despite its importance, has been seemingly overlooked by a number of P-16 initiatives is evaluation. It is important for states to build in mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of their P-16 activities, including the contributions of participants, the potential for expanding participation, and the quality of student outcomes (Chamberlin & Plucker, 2008).

A major issue in American education is to achieve equity for all children. Teach for America exists to address educational inequity - the stunning reality that the

American nation, which aspires so admirably to be a land of equal opportunity, where one is born still largely determines one's educational outcomes. Despite plenty of evidence that children growing up in poverty can do well academically - when given the opportunities they deserve - the stark reality in America today is that the 13 million children growing up below the poverty line are already three grade levels behind children in high-income communities by the time they are 9 years old. This persists because the national policies and practices, driven by national priorities, have not been sufficient to tackle either the socioeconomic challenges or the inadequacies in school systems. Teach for America is out to solve this problem because they see evidence in classrooms across the country that, when students growing up in poverty are given the opportunities they deserve, they excel (Kopp, 2008).

Another issue in American education is providing equitable and meaningful opportunities for students at the postsecondary level. College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise (2007), identified the essential aims, learning outcomes and guiding principles for a 21st century college education. Responding to the new global challenges today's students face, the report describes the learning contemporary students need from college and what it will take to help them achieve it. The essential learning outcomes delineated are:

- knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world (through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages and the arts – focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring)

- intellectual and practical skills (including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy and teamwork, and problem-solving – practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects and standards for performance)
- personal and social responsibility (including civic knowledge and engagement - local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning – anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges)
- integrative learning (including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies – demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems).

Keyed to work, life, and citizenship, the essential learning outcomes are important for all students and should be fostered and developed across the entire educational experience, and in the context of students’ major fields. They provide a new framework to guide students’ cumulative progress – as well as curricular alignment – from school through college (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise, 2007).

The Obama-Biden plan compared to research-based findings on education reform

The position of President of the United States is comprehensive, to say the least, and one might wonder how much thought and time could be devoted to any particular issue. Well, there may be a surprise in store, for considerable effort went into making the

Obama-Biden education plan reflective of today's needs when compared to what is reported in the literature.

A close review was conducted on the Obama-Biden education plan and a modest review of literature was done on education reform. Of course any review is subject to some subjectivity and this review of literature may not be as inclusive as needed.

However, in view of these limitations, the results showed that the Obama-Biden plan and the literature reflected a tremendous amount of concurrence (see Table 1). Some points of emphasis were observed in the Presidential inaugural speech that reflected on criteria stated in the literature and other criteria not explicitly stated were referenced in a general kind of way. The vice versa also was noted in the review of literature. Though the exact terms used in the Obama-Biden plan were not explicitly stated in the literature, the criteria were definitely inferred. In fact, everything included in the Obama-Biden plan was either supported in full or at least referenced in the literature.

Educators - Take it to the four corners of the classroom/world

Education reform in America has been considerably addressed over the years. A lot of focus has been on content and achievement standards. However, quality education has not reached all the students in the classroom, throughout the school, across the nation and definitely not around the world. Educators and policy makers must make it happen.

According to Hargreaves and Shirley (2008), America needs a vision of education as a public good that shapes the future of all people. This vision should help develop greater innovation and creativity, expect and demand commitment and perseverance from students, foster the international awareness and cultural understanding that strengthen

Table 1

How the Obama-Biden Plan Compares with Research-Based Findings on Criteria for Education Reform

Education Reform Objective	Addressed in Obama-Biden Plan	Addressed in Research-Based Finding
Early childhood		
Zero to five support	Yes	Yes (Brown ...)
Expand head start	Yes	(Inferred)
Affordable/quality child care	Yes	Yes (Chamberlin ...)
K-12		
Reform NCLB	Yes	Yes (Hargreaves ...)
Support high-quality schools	Yes	Yes (Brown ...)
Math and science a priority	Yes	(Inferred)
Address dropout crisis	Yes	Yes (Test drive...)
Expand afterschool opportunities	Yes	Yes (Brown)
Support college outreach programs	Yes	(Inferred)
Support college credit initiatives	Yes	(Inferred)
Support English language learners	Yes	(Inferred)
Recruit, prepare, retain, reward teachers	Yes	Yes (Hargreaves ...)
*Corporate efforts	(Inaugural)	Yes (Clinton ...)
*Narrow achievement gap	(Inferred)	Yes (Brown ...)
*Globalized and competitiveness	(Inaugural)	Yes (Brown ...)
*Equitable funding	(Inaugural)	Yes (Brown ...)
*Innovative and creative	(Inaugural)	Yes (Hargreaves)
Higher education		
Create American opportunity tax credit	Yes	Yes (Hargreaves ...)
Simplify application process for financial aid	Yes	(Inferred)
*Essential learning outcomes	(Inferred)	Yes (Nat’l Lead...)
*Higher graduation rates	(Inferred)	Yes (Brown ...)

*Objective observed from review of literature

global partnerships and security, and promote the inclusiveness that elevates people's differences into the strengths that can enable opportunity for all in a just society. In the authors' Fourth Way (of education reform), there will still be standards, including public, human, and ethical ones, but there will no longer be standardization. There will be hard work and persistence, but not pointless drudgery. There will be greater support for the education profession, but not unconditionally. The goal of the Fourth Way is to create the schools that will undergird and catalyze the best values to regenerate and improve society. Only then will the United States become the education leader that others around the globe eagerly seek (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008).

Community colleges have been a means to offer broad access to postsecondary education through open admissions and more affordable and flexible programs of study. Unfortunately, improved access has not translated into higher levels of college completion, particularly for low-income students, students of color, and others who traditionally have not fared well in college. In the past 20 years, according OECD statistics, the United States has dropped from first to tenth in the world in the percent of young adults, aged 25-34, with an Associate's degree or higher. Faced with burgeoning enrollments and stagnating completion rates, states have a growing interest in strengthening their community college data and performance measurement systems to better track student progress and success (Test drive, 2008).

Harney (2007) described the top end of the education achievement gap as a chasm. Few Black and Hispanic students score over 1200 on the SAT, fewer enroll in selective colleges and fewer still earn advanced degrees. Education reforms and media attention have focused overwhelmingly on the lower end of the divide, preoccupied with

students meeting minimum standards. In discussing the achievement gap, rarely is there talk about helping smart kids get smarter. Tough love, positive peer pressure and other strategies could be employed to increase the motivation of high-potential minority students and bridge the chasm at the top. There is a need to set high expectations for minority students, provide intensive support and send a powerful message to students: “No goals are beyond your reach.” Educators must focus on making the students believe they have it in them to succeed and graduate from college. Eventually the desire to achieve becomes internalized. While the focus is often on college admission, many talented minority students fail once they reach college, sometimes because of academic demands but often because they lack the social skills, life skills and other resources they need to thrive on campus (Harney, 2007).

The great challenge for educators – Change too

It appears that the best and fastest way to change or improve a system is for those who operate the system to embrace the change and make necessary adjustments to implement it. For education reform to become reality, educators must step to the plate and make it happen.

Considerable attention in education is now on human capital. Maxwell and Gewertz (2008) noted that as the pressure to improve schools mounts – and reform efforts fall short – a growing number of school districts are zeroing in on developing “human capital” as the key strategy to improve learning. It is reported that Bill Gates said “A model that depends on great teaching can’t be replicated by schools that can’t attract and develop great teachers.” Strategic management of teachers, principals, and central-office workers includes recruiting and developing people and using the system’s performance as

a guide to evaluating and paying them. Strategic Management of Human Capital, a national task force, was formed to help the nation's 100-largest districts figure out how to attract the most promising teachers and principals and manage them effectively. What is missing, are broad, thoughtful strategies that link the major components of school districts' personnel systems – recruitment, hiring, placement, induction, professional development, evaluation, compensation, and termination – to their bottom-line goals for students. Districts must find ways to compensate teachers who perform well and improve their practice in ways that meet the district's goals, rather than simply granting raises for adding more graduate credits to their resumes. This kind of management is important for closing the achievement gap (Maxwell & Gewertz, 2008).

Now that President Obama has a specific plan on the table for education, educators may be concerned as to how they can facilitate its implementation. A simplistic, but potentially potent way may be to make change within themselves. This is illustrated by operationalizing the word CHANGE (see Table 2). Each letter has particular meaning.

The ultimate challenge for educators – “Get on the ball”

There have been many good ideas on education reform, but not all of them have made significant impact because the “ball” wall dropped along the way. Here, it is viewed that the ultimate challenge for educators is to “get on the ball.”

Table 2

CHANGE Operationalized

<u>Letter</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
C	Check Obama’s education list (check it twice - What’s naughty, nice or needed? validate it; refine it)
H	Hold plan dear to heart (buy into refined agenda, incorporate into philosophy)
A	Align methodologies and resources to implement the agenda
N	Notify all appropriate constituents that change is on the horizon (“World, get ready, hear we come”)
G	Give best effort in education every day (every move you make, every step you take, “I’ll be watching you”)
E	Evaluate progress made at regular intervals (make every subsequent effort better than the one before)

There is an anecdote (author unknown) about getting on the ball. It follows: “A golfer was playing golf and the ball went off course and landed in a huge ant bed. The golfer went to drive the ball out and back on course. The club was drawn back and a mighty swing was made. Ants were knocked every where but the ball was not touched. With greater anticipation, an even mightier swing was made. This time, all the other ants except two were driven from the bed, while the ball remained untouched. One of the remaining two ants looked at the other and said, if we want to stay here, we had better get on the ball.” Educators are charged to make education reform work by getting on the ball

(see Figure 1). Educators are not to get on just any ball, but get on the Obama ball. They are not to just get on the ball, but to take the Ba from Obama's first name and "rock" the ball. They are not to just rock the ball a little, but are to rock the Obama ball until "All of God's children ... are free (and educated) at last!"

Figure 1

The Obama Ball

(Adapted form "golf ball," netscape.com)



Challenges

- Get on the Obama ball
 - Don't just get on the ball; take the Ba from Obama's first name and "Rock" the ball
 - Don't just rock the Obama ball a little; but rock, or as educators, "Teach" until ...
 - Teach until "All of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free (and educated) at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" (American Rhetoric, n.d.)
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There is much to be said about getting on the ball. Exemplary teachers demonstrate defining personality attributes that outweigh the importance of professional skills. Certification is not the guarantee of teacher effectiveness that the NCLBA would like it to be. So what is needed above and beyond these criteria? Teachers who have mastered their subject matter but who lack the ability to purposefully engage students, are commonplace. For mastery to make a difference to students, teachers must also summon from within certain qualities of personality that have little to do with subject matter or theories of instruction. These qualities are not learned, they are called forth – and by understanding them, they are used for the benefit of others. The most frequently mentioned characteristics of effective teachers included personal magnetism, personal appearance, breadth and intensity of interest, considerateness, and leadership (Mowrer-Reynolds, 2008)

Research on effective teaching has typically addressed two categories: professional skills (pedagogy, subject matter knowledge, policy, cultural knowledge, multiple approaches and teaching style, etc.) and personal teacher characteristics (caring, enthusiastic, fun, humorous, friendly, supportive, respectful, etc.). While subject matter knowledge is important, teachers' characteristics matter more when student achievement is at stake. These findings transcend ethnicity and culture. College students emphasized that effective teachers possessed the characteristics of being fun, caring, friendly, patient, respectful of students, and staying for the long haul. Some of the statements that they made were: "I want you to know me." "I want you to not just stick to the subject but to take time to joke and tell stories. That helps me to learn that you're a person and not just a teacher." College professors' attitudes toward students were perceived by students as

being more important than their knowledge of the subject matter. Students stated that they learned more than just content from effective teachers, they learned an appreciation of the subject. It has been found that students are reliable judges of teacher effectiveness. Student ratings of teaching effectiveness were significantly correlated with measures of achievement such as students' exams and performance. Two dimensions of teacher behavior that correlate highest with student achievement are "clarity" and "enthusiasm." Material presented in a "dynamic" fashion involving humor, expressive speech, and movement and gesture, was recalled significantly better than the same material presented in a "static" fashion. It is only natural, that students would prefer to learn from enthusiastic, fun, humorous, respectful teachers who know their subject matter and give them outside help towards success while making them feel good about themselves (Mowrer-Reynolds, 2008).

Summary and implications

Education in America has come a long way, but it has miles to go before all children are developed to their maximum potential. So it is very encouraging to have President Barack Obama calling for change that will lead the country closer than ever in meeting its educational goal. But the President needs help; he needs teachers who will get on the ball with him.

The Obama-Biden education plan was examined for face value and scrutinized by standards for education reform in the literature. In both instances, the plan appears sound. Of course, some may say that more could have been included at the college level or perhaps another level, but there will surely be room for other good ideas to surface and

be incorporated. A “plan” is not sealed in concrete, it is subject to systematic review and modification.

America appears positioned to be a world-class country in education. With this achievement, it will be a dynamic, first-class leader of the free world.

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