

Next president: Lead education renaissance



By Sharon Hartin Iorio

Dear Mr. President-elect:

There's no doubt that you're going to be mighty busy. After the victory congratulations, you'll enter the White House facing tremendous challenges, among them our national economy, defense, energy policy and health care. Moreover, new, unexpected issues will arise to challenge you, perhaps before you even take office.

Yet I must write to ask you to please not let immediate pressures of the day, no matter how large, overshadow the silent but fast-growing and possibly largest challenge ever to America's well being.

I am writing about the importance of an educated population, the status of our nation's educational systems, and the need for you to lead a nationwide effort to create a 21st-century educational renaissance in this country.

The wealth of our nation is shifting from abundant natural resources to reliance on highly skilled human capital.

Yet today the national high school dropout rate, which is increasing, stands at 25 percent, and half of our minority students do not finish high school in four years.

There are many more openings for nurses, engineers, teachers and other trained professionals

than there are new university graduates to fill the vacancies. At the same time, many skilled labor jobs are going overseas, leaving fewer resources for Americans with manufacturing jobs.

Mr. President, what you do or don't do about education during your term of office will affect our nation's growth and well-being for years to come.

We need those 25 percent who drop out to complete high school, and for the majority of them to go on to postsecondary education. In today's global economy, those without a high school degree face seriously limited future career options, and the vast array of opportunities come to those who go further in their education.

Many ideas to strengthen public education were put forward by both Republicans and Democrats during the election - support for preschool learning, charter schools, making higher education more affordable. All good but partial solutions.

We need a comprehensive education policy in the same manner that we think of shaping a national energy policy or health care policy.

To turn our public K-12 education system around and provide wider, affordable access to postsecondary education, we need to think of education as a public issue of the same

magnitude as reform of Social Security or health care.

We need an integrated, high-quality system that offers preschool instruction for all children, strengthened K-12 learning, and expanded postsecondary and midcareer retraining opportunities.

Fixing the American education system will lead to a better, more flexible work force and more knowledgeable citizens, better prepared to resolve the social and political problems now before us. This reimagining of education as the foundation of our nation's new opportunities will not be easy to accomplish.

It will take a national focus on the importance of education. It will take full public support and considerable funding to go forward. It will take you being out front, talking about the power of education to enhance individuals' lives and change the world. It will take a renaissance. A very tall order, but we're behind you, Mr. President-elect. Help us to value and build on education as our country's most vital resource.

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