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To The Editor:

The President's 10 point plan for education *appears* a much-needed, courageous plan, worthy of national support and befitting the title so well-sought by the Education President. But while good intentions and capturing the minds and hearts of the American people are both important elements of public policy, so is embracing an agenda that *really* addresses what ails America's schools.

Information is power. To ensure that the problems the President attempts to address are clear, I offer the following:

- Barely 40% of our 4th graders can read at a *basic* level;
- The United States ranks 28th of 41 countries in math, although American students report that they are "usually doing well;"
- Limited SAT gains are attributable to changes in the test scoring and limited to those already at the top of the scale, although scores among white students have declined precipitously within the last 20 years;
- 78% of four-year public colleges and universities offer some type of remedial reading and math programs to incoming freshman; and
- It is proven that as little as 52% of every education dollar makes it to the classroom.

If the statistics - while not showing the whole picture - are not enough, consider the obstacles encountered when parents, teachers or reform-minded administrators try to change the system.

- In Hartford, CT the teachers' union sued over a plan by the school board to link pay with performance, claiming that "research shows no correlation between teaching and learning."
- The East St. Louis, IL school board rejected two proposals creating new public charter schools which would serve children who have fallen through the cracks. One board member quipped "We have 13,000 students at risk. This doesn't solve anything."
- Two Minnesota Teachers of the Year were let go because they lacked seniority.
- Thousands of families nationwide are forced to lie about their place of residence just to ensure that their children go to schools that work, thereby risking a criminal offense punishable by monetary penalties and possibly incarceration.

While public education in America *should* be cherished, the system has digressed in too many places, and we've forgotten the central mission and focus of our efforts and attention: **children**.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the President's agenda.

Tax-credits to make the first two years of college universal.

This in the face of statistics that show our K-12 house is not in order, not to mention that increases in federal student aid show direct correlation with increases in college tuition;

A proposal to fund 100,000 master certified teachers.

By an organization that is representative of those who currently control the process: teacher education colleges and unions. If, as the National Commission on Teaching and Learning reported earlier this year, our teacher quality is not measuring up and far too many credentialed teachers are not well-prepared, what would a subjective process do for us that allows another degree to be added to one's credentials without any tie to how well their students perform or how parents view the teacher's performance?

Paid-volunteers - an oxymoron - to help all 8-year olds learn to read.

Having an 8-year old myself, I really find this amusing. As a parent with access to some of the finest literature around through my profession, I find "tutoring" the most difficult thing in the world to do. It requires a strong level of knowledge as to how children process information. It requires a solid curriculum, as California found out when it discovered one day that it ranked only ahead of Louisiana nationwide in the number of 4th graders who could read at a proficient level, after being forbidden to learn under phonics-based reading instruction. This begs the question: Why do we need *paid* tutors, receiving federal work-study money or Americorps subsidies, to do the job schools are responsible for? Think about it.

A White House conference on early learning and expansion of Head Start.

Conferences are overrated, and Head Start, when it existed with less federal regulation, was a very worthwhile health and nutrition program. It has never been an educational program, as evidenced by the federal study that showed that gains from Head Start are short-lived if children are put into ineffective schools.

Public school choice [yawn].

Public school choice is in 18 states, and that's good. People need more choices, and many children in states like Minnesota have benefited from moving to a different school, and the competition created has had some impact on overall quality. But change can only *really* occur where one has the *authority* to actually change to respond to children's needs and parental demands. That's where the President's foray into Charter Schools is welcome fodder for those of us who have been leading the charge for years. The trick is to get the President to come out and declare that not all charter school laws are created equally, and a rose by any other name is not a rose. For example, his home state of Arkansas has the worst charter law in the land, but is hailed by the Arkansas teachers' union as the best, and efforts to amend it have seen no support from the Administration. It's hard to call his enthusiasm "support" when little is done to clearly define a charter school.

School construction money.

Many a district in disrepair would welcome \$5 million in funding. It is scandalous that some children have to attend schools left to rot. But in addition to the \$5 million, where is the outrage over the misspent and misguided funds allocated to individual states and school districts, never making their way to the building and construction projects? Where's the outrage from Hillary Rodham Clinton as she visited a decrepit Washington, DC school this week to deliver \$19 million in new federal funds? Wasn't she the least bit tempted to ask where the other \$50 million went?

And finally - the crown jewel of the package - national testing.

This proposal has the most appeal to true reformers, who believe that we must have more steady and accurate information about how our schools perform. In fact, it is very similar to a proposal of then President George Bush, whose Secretary of Education recommended a full expansion of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the nation's only barometer of student achievement. That proposal was torpedoed. This again deserves some consideration, with the caveat that the Department of Education wash its hands of the whole affair, and allow those who oversee NAEP as a quasi-independent board to have control over developing the expanded, nationally available but voluntary, tests. NAEP has shown its merits to date, yet the detractors of NAEP and attempts to water down this assessment given annually to samples of students have come from the very same bureaucrats who are now tasked with creating a new test. Expand NAEP, let states like Texas choose to use it if they believe it will help, but allow the process to be unfettered by those who try to make us believe that there is a "manufactured crisis" alive in society.

There was one key element missing from the President's agenda. He has tax credits for college, job vouchers for adults, but there is no mention of the opportunities existing for poor children in non-public schools. Because of their plight, they are often relegated to dens of "inequity." It is time to build upon the great efforts of Wisconsin and Ohio, and allow children who are shut out of good schools the chance to thrive in places that have proven their success time and again. For if we truly believe that one size does not fit all, and we truly believe in equity, we must be willing to allow more people to have the right fit and accept that for now, it may be in a private school.

The issues are far more complex than a professionally-authored speech and plan allows. Take time to get the facts about your own schools, get involved, and when you begin to get the answers you've sought, determine whether they are good enough. Excellence in public education will come about only by real live freedom for schools, teachers and children. That's something that only the states - with the fortitude to act - can deliver.

Jeanne Allen
President

Jeanne Allen is President of the Center for Education Reform, an independent, national, non-profit advocacy organization providing support and guidance to individuals nationwide who are working to bring fundamental reforms to their schools.