

## POLICY PRIMER

*Strong American Schools is a nonpartisan public awareness and action campaign offering a voice to every American who supports "ED in 08." Our goal is to make education a top priority in the 2008 presidential election and ensure that the nation engages in a rigorous debate on the issue. We expect candidates to offer genuine leadership rather than empty rhetoric and tell voters how they intend to strengthen America's schools so all students receive the education they deserve.*

### I. THE NEED FOR ACTION

Since America's founding, schools have been a gateway to a better life for millions and millions of people, equipping them to lead the world they've inherited and accomplish goals greater than they ever could have imagined. Education is the key that unlocks opportunity and liberates human potential. It enables people of any race, religion, ethnicity, gender, income, or family background to have a chance of realizing their hopes and dreams.

But today's students are losing out. The world is changing, jobs are evolving, and far too many students are simply not being prepared to be successful adults:

- » Seventy percent of eighth graders are not proficient in reading—and most will never catch up.<sup>1</sup>
- » Every year, more than 1 million students drop out of high school.<sup>2</sup>
- » Many of those who do graduate are not ready for college, for the workplace, and for life.<sup>3</sup>

In a country celebrated for providing opportunity, we should be especially embarrassed that educational outcomes are even worse for America's low-income and minority students. In a country where two-thirds of new jobs being created require higher education or advanced training, these troubling trends make it harder for students from *all walks of life* to get a job and attain a middle class lifestyle.<sup>4</sup>

The American Dream is in danger. Eighty percent of tenth graders plan to earn a college degree, but weak skills prevent too many from realizing their dreams.<sup>5</sup> Nearly three in ten have to take remedial courses when they get to college.<sup>6</sup> Nearly half of the freshmen who enter four-year colleges fail to earn a diploma after six years.<sup>7</sup> Their parents are paying for college courses, but they are not reaping the benefits of a college degree.

Those who head straight to the workplace fare no better. Employers are having trouble filling high-paying jobs with qualified candidates. More than 70 percent of high school graduates who head straight to the workforce say they wish they had taken tougher courses in high school.<sup>8</sup>

America is in danger of losing its competitive edge because we are not preparing today's students to be skilled workers for tomorrow's economy. In today's wired and digitized world, jobs can be done virtually anywhere. The best opportunities will go to the best educated, no matter where they live. Other countries are making the commitment to seize this opportunity. While America once had the best high school graduation rate in the world, today it ranks only 19<sup>th</sup> among top developed countries.<sup>9</sup>

Weak education threatens more than just jobs. Parents need to understand complicated informa-

tion to make good decisions about health care and family finances. Citizens face difficult choices that will impact their communities. If we fail to act, the U.S. economy will suffer, crime will go up, and working families will be unable to afford a house. Future generations could find themselves without the skills they need to survive in the global economy—let alone seize the opportunities of tomorrow.

This is not somebody else's problem. This is an *American* problem that affects us all. It is about the students we see in our own neighborhoods every day. They will be the doctors of tomorrow who care for our health. The engineers designing the innovations that make life better for us. The leaders who will make the decisions that affect us all.

We are all responsible for those students and our public schools that serve them. And the future of our nation depends on whether we can come together to meet this challenge. *All* students have a right to strong schools, but *everyone* will benefit from them.

## II. STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

We urge leaders to address three common-sense priorities that hold great promise for improving education:

1. American education standards. Regardless of where they live, all students need to acquire knowledge and skills that prepare them for college, for the workplace, and for life. From New Hampshire to Nevada, every student deserves a strong curriculum in subjects like math and English.
2. Effective teachers in every classroom. We need to enable teachers to improve their skills, measure teachers' performance in the classroom,

and pay them more if they produce superior results or take on challenging assignments.

3. More time and support for learning. We need to provide successful and struggling students alike more time for in-depth learning and greater personal attention.

Rigorous standards, effective teaching, and time and support for learning are among the most important resources that any school can provide its students. They are the backbone of a strong education system. And they matter at all levels—from preschool through high school—for students from all walks of life.

For too long, we have allowed partisan politics to stand in the way of tackling tough challenges and improving education in fundamental ways. The time for partisan bickering is over. It is time to make education an American priority and work together to give all students strong schools.

### **American Education Standards**

All students, no matter where they live, have a right to a quality education that will prepare them for life. Every student. No exceptions. Whether they're going off to college or the workforce, it is the responsibility of public education to give our students the skills and knowledge to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In the past, high school graduates could get good-paying jobs without great math and reading skills. But the workplace is changing. Occupations that pay enough to raise a family—even jobs like electrical work, construction, upholstering, and plumbing—now require the same math and reading skills it takes to be successful in college.<sup>10</sup> Two thirds of new jobs being created in today's economy require higher education or advanced training.<sup>11</sup> College prep *is* work prep. And both are preparation for life.

But too many students are not learning what they need to be successful adults:

- » According to a recent analysis of education standards, more than two-thirds of students attend class in states with mediocre expectations for what their students should learn.<sup>12</sup>
- » Across the nation, school districts routinely hand out high school diplomas to students who have not mastered the skills necessary to succeed in college and work. Only thirteen states have raised their graduation requirements to match the real-world demands that students face after they leave high school.<sup>13</sup>

Tragically, many students and families are finding out too late. More than 60 percent of high school graduates who go on to college say they wish they had taken tougher classes in high school.<sup>14</sup> Regrets run even deeper among those who head straight for the workforce: Seventy-two percent wish they had taken tougher courses in high school. Half of them specifically regret not learning more math.<sup>15</sup>

All parents and taxpayers deserve honest information about how students are progressing in their learning, but states with low expectations paint a pretty picture that doesn't match reality. As a result, many parents don't even know that their children lack adequate preparation for today's world:

- » Some states are vastly inflating how much their students are really learning. Almost 20 states reported that 8<sup>th</sup> graders improved in reading from 2003 to 2005, but only three states showed improvements on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Some states reporting gains actually showed declines on that national assessment.<sup>16</sup>
- » Although every state requires high school

students to take tests, only a handful make sure those tests measure readiness for college and work.<sup>17</sup>

There is even some troubling evidence that some states are lowering their testing requirements to make students look like they are learning more than they really are.<sup>18</sup> Left unchecked, a "race to the bottom" among states would imperil efforts to raise student achievement and put America at even greater disadvantage internationally.

That's just not good enough. Not good enough for students who dream of going to college, having careers, and raising families. Not good enough for communities that depend on educated citizens. And not good enough for a country that prides itself on offering opportunities and the chance for a better life. Education *everywhere* should prepare children for life *anywhere*.

We *know* we can do better. Leaders in nearly 30 states have pledged to raise high school standards to a level that will make diplomas meaningful again. Nine states have banded together to create common standards for high school algebra—a critical gateway to success in college and work. They plan to make the standards available to other states when they are finished.

That is good news. Common standards make common sense. Right now, America's patchwork of expectations for learning causes confusion in the classroom. To sell textbooks, publishers cram them with enough material to cover all 50 state standards—literally too much to learn in one year.<sup>19</sup> Teachers end up rushing through lessons and students fall behind. Other countries are taking a more sensible approach. Singapore's math textbooks are half the size of ours, but its students have a stron-

ger grasp of basic math.<sup>20</sup>

We have fifty states, but we are one nation. It is time to agree on American standards that build on the work being done by forward-thinking states. Regardless of where they live, all students need to learn skills that prepare them for college, for the workplace, and for life. From New Hampshire to Nevada, every student deserves a strong curriculum in subjects like math and English.

Let us be clear: We are *not* calling for a “federal takeover” of education or a nationally mandated curriculum. Instead, we are calling on presidential candidates to tell voters how they intend to work with state and local leaders to arrive at rigorous American education standards. There are many possible paths to such a destination, and that is part of the debate we hope to encourage.

States and local communities are responsible for educating students, and that must be respected. The aim is *not* to “nationalize” the curriculum in each grade by having Washington officials dictate a lesson plan for every school in the country. But in order to give all young Americans the chance to succeed, we must make it an American priority to ensure that all students master basic knowledge in subjects such as math and English. The future of our children—and the nation they will inherit—depends upon it.

#### ***Effective Teachers in Every Classroom***

Teachers have a bigger impact on students’ learning than anything else in schools. They are the single greatest “natural resource” in education. That is hardly a secret. Ninety-one percent of Americans believe that ensuring quality teachers in every classroom is very important.<sup>21</sup>

The best teachers can stimulate a passion for learning and knowledge, leaving an impression on students that lasts a lifetime. And they help students build strong basic skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives. In fact, research shows that having effective or ineffective teachers during elementary school can literally make or break a student’s chances for learning enough to become a successful adult.<sup>22</sup>

We know teachers matter, yet we do not act like it: We do not give teachers the same opportunities for advancement and better pay that other professionals enjoy. We do not offer higher salaries to compete with other professions for adults who have strong math and science backgrounds. And we do not pay teachers more even when we ask them to take on harder jobs.

The results are now painfully clear:

- » We are failing to attract the best and brightest to teach our students. America’s highest-achieving young adults are less likely to train to become teachers, less likely to take a teaching job, and less likely to stay in the classroom rather than leaving after a few years.<sup>23</sup> Seven in ten recent college graduates think teaching doesn’t offer good opportunities for advancement.<sup>24</sup>
- » We are not attracting enough experienced, effective teachers to work in our most disadvantaged schools. The combination of low pay and poor working conditions in those schools creates constant turnover, with high-poverty urban schools losing over one fifth of their faculties each year—enough for an entire staff to turn over within five years.<sup>25</sup> Their places are filled with novices who often lack the knowledge and experience to be successful. As a result, America’s low-income and minority students are

fare more likely to be taught by inexperienced and ineffective teachers.<sup>26</sup>

- » We are not attracting enough teachers in critical subjects. More than one-third of math classes in U.S. middle and high schools are taught by someone who lacks even a college minor in math-related field, and that climbs to more than 70 percent in America's high-poverty and high-minority middle schools.<sup>27</sup> In fact, more than 12 million American students in grades 7-12 are taught academic courses by teachers who have no degree in the subject they're teaching.<sup>28</sup>

We know we can do better. Across America, state and local leaders are starting to roll up their sleeves to fix these problems. Some are finding ways to value ambitious young teachers by giving them opportunities for advancement and better pay that other professionals enjoy. Others are working harder to staff disadvantaged schools with more experienced and effective teachers or finding ways to fill shortages in subjects like math and science.

Educators in more than 130 schools across America have adopted an innovative **Teacher Advancement Program** (TAP). TAP supports teachers by giving them opportunities to learn and become stronger professionals. And it values teachers by rewarding them for taking on leadership roles, contributing to their schools' improvement, performing well in the classroom, or improving their students' learning. Teachers no longer have to leave the classroom for the front office or leave education altogether to earn more respect and higher pay. A new "Q Comp" program provides very similar opportunities in schools throughout **Minnesota**.

Under an agreement called "ProComp," teachers in **Denver** can earn more by performing well in the classroom, improving their students' learning, taking

jobs in low-performing schools, or filling positions in shortage areas like math or science. Teachers were the driving force behind designing ProComp and getting it approved.

In **Chattanooga**, a coalition of community and education leaders have used a range of incentives to reduce turnover and attract highly effective teachers to work in the city's most troubled elementary schools. And in **Brooklyn**, a parent-led community group worked with the teachers' union and the school district to offer higher pay for experienced teachers to teach classes and mentor novice teachers in troubled schools.

Now it is time to honor those local efforts with a national commitment to providing powerful teaching in every classroom. We need to attract talented adults to the profession by offering teachers opportunities to earn advancement and better pay. And we need to provide incentives for effective teachers to take on difficult assignments and fill critical shortages in subjects like math and science.

The federal government cannot solve this problem alone—nor should it try to do so. Local communities have responsibility for hiring and paying teachers. But we need strong presidential leadership to galvanize action at the national, state, and local levels.

Teaching offers many satisfactions beyond pay, and many educators love working with children. But it is a mistake to treat teachers like volunteers rather than paid professionals. Economists have shown that teachers and prospective teachers do respond to monetary incentives.<sup>29</sup> We need to value the work our teachers do enough to compensate them for their performance on the job.

Measuring teacher performance is neither simple

nor easy. It takes more than just looking at students' end-of-year test scores. But fair and accurate techniques exist. Schools using the TAP program look at how much a teacher's students learn from the beginning of the school year to the end of it. At least four times a year, trained evaluators observe teachers to see how well they are living up to common standards for professional skills, knowledge, and responsibility.

Consistently effective teachers should be rewarded above consistently ineffective teachers. Few other professions would pay less to a high-performing employee than a low-performing colleague simply because the high performer has less experience. And few other professions would routinely assign the weakest members to take on the toughest jobs.

Three years ago the Teaching Commission called on leaders to address these and other challenges. Since then there has been some progress, but not enough.

Our schools will be hiring millions of new teachers over the next decade as a large wave of older teachers from the "baby boom" generation start to retire. Will we act now to bring the best and brightest young Americans into our public schools and classrooms? Will we finally begin to value teachers who take on tougher jobs and fill shortage areas? We *know* we can do better by our teachers and our students. The only question is whether we will.

### **More Time and Support for Learning**

We are expecting students to learn more than ever before so they can be better prepared for life. But learning takes time and it takes support. If we are going to demand more from our students, it is our obligation to give them what they need to succeed.

But too many American students are not getting the time and support they need. Some fall behind academically and never catch up. Others become bored. Studies show that students who fail even one class or become disengaged in middle or high school drop out at much higher rates.<sup>30</sup>

Many students start school with significant disadvantages. Other students fall behind along the way. In poor urban neighborhoods, the average student enters high school three to four years behind grade level in reading and math.<sup>31</sup> Too often they get placed in low-level courses with teachers who do not have enough time to get them caught up. But the problem doesn't just affect students in inner cities. Too many graduates are having a hard time finding work because they lack the skills to perform even basic jobs.

We *know* we can do better. Innovative educators around the country are beginning to break the mold to provide more time and support for learning.

In more than 50 schools founded by the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), students begin each day at 7:30 a.m. and end at 5 p.m. Half-day classes are held on Saturdays, and students attend summer sessions spanning 2–4 weeks. All told, KIPP students get about 60 percent more class time than their peers.<sup>32</sup> The results are astounding: In Washington, DC, KIPP fifth graders improved so much in just one year that they rose from the *bottom* 15% to the *top* 25% of students in the nation.<sup>33</sup>

Massachusetts is giving ten schools in five communities the resources to provide students with 30% more time for learning. Some are extending the school day, while others are lengthening the year. But all of them have one thing in common: They are not just treating extra time as a boring "add on."



Instead, they are reinventing the entire education program to be richer, deeper, and more engaging. They are providing

- » More and better instruction in math, reading, history, and science;
- » Personalized attention for students who need it;
- » Enrichment activities in subjects like arts, music, and drama; and
- » Opportunities for teachers to work together to improve learning.

That program was inspired by research conducted by a nonprofit group called Massachusetts 2020. It found that every single one of the highest performing urban high schools in the state used an expanded school day to help students learn more. It also found that 80% of all charter schools in Massachusetts offered more than the standard 32.5 hours of education per week.<sup>34</sup>

Other countries are doing even more. By the time they've graduated from high school, students in other countries have obtained the equivalent of one more year of education than their American counterparts. The average school year of nations participating in the Third International Math and Science Survey is 193 days, compared with 180 days in the U.S.<sup>35</sup> China provides 30% more education than America, and Singapore has a policy to extend math classes by 30% for students who fall behind in basic skills by the end of fifth grade.

Let us be clear: *All* students will benefit from the kind of in-depth learning and greater personal attention that a longer school day or longer school year would allow. But we are *not* simply calling for students to spend more time in school, adding hours and days that just offer more of the same. Instead, we should build on lessons from innovative schools that are

revitalizing and rejuvenating education by providing richer instruction. Those lessons include:

- » **Better instruction in the basics:** Teachers in subjects like math, reading, science, and history will have more time to answer students' questions, explore topics in greater depth, and incorporate hands-on projects like science labs that require longer class periods. "With longer classes every question is answered—no stone is left unturned," says a student in a Massachusetts high school.<sup>36</sup> Research shows more time for engaged instruction boosts student learning.<sup>37</sup> In addition, teachers will be able to plan better lessons because they will have more time to work together to improve student learning.
- » **Opportunities for enrichment:** Students will have more time for pursuits like art, music, drama, debate—activities that build confidence, challenge young minds, and teach skills beyond the academic curriculum. At the high school level, enrichment can include topics like college counseling and career exploration. "At other schools you don't always get the extras because you don't have time," says a Massachusetts parent. "Here the kids get so much more than academics, they don't get bored."<sup>38</sup> Another benefit: According to surveys of teenagers, boredom is the leading cause of dropping out.<sup>39</sup>
- » **Personalized attention:** Teachers will have more time to work with students one-on-one, and students will have more time to get tutoring and advice from adults when they need it. Those interactions also will build stronger, more supportive relationships between teachers and students—another factor proven to dramatically reduce dropout rates.<sup>40</sup>

We recognize that many schools could make more

efficient use of the time they already have. One study found that Chicago's elementary schools delivered fewer than 240 minutes of classroom instruction each day—an hour less than the 300 minutes students were supposed to receive.<sup>41</sup> We need to give school administrators the tools to conduct “time audits” and the expert advice to use time more efficiently. Making better use of time should go hand in hand with efforts to provide more of it.

But we need to act now to give successful and struggling students alike more time for in-depth learning, personal attention, and enrichment. The time and support we provide America's students should match the high aspirations we have for them.

### III. THE DEBATE WE DESERVE — THE ACTION WE NEED

Education is vital to America's future. All students have a right to strong schools built on rigorous standards, effective teaching, and time and support to learn. But if we are ever going to arrive at that destination, the journey will need to begin with a more serious discussion of how we plan to get there.

Anxiety about how to survive and prosper in unsettling economic times makes most Americans ready for bold answers—certainly bolder than those our policymakers have felt comfortable proposing so far. The discussion must include every American with a stake in better schools. And that means every American period.

We need to move beyond Republican and Democrat, progressive and conservative, so we can reach consensus on how to make our schools beacons of learning and pathways to progress. Improving student learning is not a partisan or ideological issue. It is an American issue that concerns us all.

But a robust debate is only the beginning. America must take action now to prepare students for the future, not just tomorrow but 10 years from now and 20 years from now. Americans must come together to provide all students the kinds of opportunities that every family wants for its children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, and neighbors.

This campaign needs your help, your knowledge, your energy – most of all – your action. Get the facts. Join the debate. E-mail your friends, your family members, and your coworkers. Connect with other Americans around the country who share your concerns and think the time to act is now. Raise your voice so our leaders hear us loud and clear.

A strong America depends on Strong American Schools.

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2. *This calculation is based on the estimated number of students in high school who will drop out this year in grades 9-12. The data were provided by Jay Greene at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.*
3. *For example, based on calculations by Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, only about half of high school graduates are prepared to meet minimum standards of the least selective four-year colleges. Greene, J.P. & Winters, M.A. (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002*. New York: Manhattan Institute. According to surveys by Public Agenda, “The vast majority of employers and professors continue to have serious doubts about public school graduates’ basic skills.”*



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