OPENING REMARKS TO CLASSROOM POLITICS: A SYMPOSIUM ON EDUCATION REFORM

EDUCATION AS THE CENTRAL ISSUE TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY

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I have the responsibility tonight, or the challenge, of using a few moments to offer some tidbits of information from my perspective as it relates not only to the Twenty-First Congressional District, but to New York and, for that matter, the nation with regards to education policy. Although tonight and tomorrow many of the participants in this symposium will discuss the issue of quality education, I would like to focus my remarks on how I see education as the epicenter issue when it comes to economic recovery and economic development.

There is no doubt that we bottomed out economically in 2009 with the recession. Through the leadership of President Obama, however, and the response of this Congress, we have been able to stop the bleeding. Now, the awesome challenge to this presidential administration, and to all of us in Congress, is to grow employment and to recover from the devastation of 8.2 million jobs lost and 18.2 trillion dollars lost to household incomes during the last eighteen months of the Bush Presidency. President Obama started in a very deep, dark hole, and part of the recovery will be to develop a sound education policy.

My two key committee assignments were those that I was granted by the leadership of the House. I had asked for Science and Technology and Education and Labor. My background is that of engineering. I have a combined degree in mechanical and industrial engineering and I have used that in an analytical way in the halls of Congress and before that, in my twenty-five years worth of experience in the New York State Assembly—many of those years were as a member seated on the Assembly Education

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Committee. I then transitioned that over to my assignments on the Education and Labor Committee in Washington, and the joy of that committee is that we cover higher education—we go from Pre-K on up to twelve and then on up to sixteen, twenty, and beyond. So it covers a gamut of activity that is holistic as it approaches education and higher education policy.

It is important for us as Americans to invest in our research and development and often times we do so through higher education institutions. The Pre-K through twelve grades, however, are the ones that we need to start providing incentives for career paths in some of the areas we are underproducing—that being engineering, science, and math. These incentives are necessary and essential, especially when you compare our results to other nations and their economies and their outcomes. Asian cultures are producing far more engineers, for example, than European cultures, who in turn are producing far more than the United States. So there are challenges out there, and we need to respond with the work force necessary to accompany the capital infrastructure that will be the investments for sound growth in our economy. The President stands behind that message, and I am very supportive of working with those dynamics for the Education and Labor Committee on which I serve.

Now in Congress we have a huge assignment with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As you know, many people have bemoaned the entire No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which produced stricter principles but no funding to accompany it. Many people were disenchanted by the results, especially educators and concerned partners in education. They felt that it was a shallow and not so

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2 See 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2006) (describing the NCLB’s goal of “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers”).
supportive reform and it really left these individuals more aggravated than productive. Enters in now the current Department of Education’s “Race to the Top” Program, which provides benchmarks for performance and improvements to measure progress within the system\(^3\)—all of which, I think is, good. I think the transparency and accountability debates in the education arena are essential ingredients that allow us to have better results. As we look at some of these reforms, I have some strong opinions that I will share with you here this evening. They may not be the universal thinking in Washington, but I will share them and offer my reasons why.

First with the ESEA, before we address anything, we need to reform and strengthen Title I funding.\(^4\) Title I reaches needs in the classroom and often times is matched by ability to pay or lack of ability at home. I just came off a campaign and got elected to my second term in Congress, but it came with a struggle because people are angry, they are frightened, and they are confused. There is a lot of emotion that went into the ballot this year—and sometimes not enough thought process—but there was definitely an emotional level that was unmatched in years prior and that was driven by growth in taxes. In this state, property taxes are the local source that feeds our K–12 formula.\(^5\) The expectation of property taxpayers across this country has grown and it cannot be sustained. Here in this state, we have a huge investment in education through property taxes. As a nation, we are relying more and more on property tax dollars as the states are still feeling the impact of our recession. This is a bubble that is about to break and we cannot let down our children. How we respond to that is going to be key and instrumental.

Title I funding, which advances policy that speaks to kids in need, is essential. We need to reform that and bring it back to its original intent. Sometimes these well-intentioned programs get stretched to the politics of geography at times where there is more affluence and more voting in the suburbs. Thus, a policy intended for struggle, for children at risk, becomes stretched and diluted. We need to get it back, rein it in, reform it, get it where


\(^5\) See John Davis & Michael Woyton, Caps Studied As Schools Take 66% of Property Tax, Poughkeepsie Journal, at APJ1 (noting that in 2009, sixty-six percent of the $737.7 million raised through local property taxes in New York went to fund state public schools).
it was originally intended and then fund it adequately. Before you do anything else, that would be my formula for success with ESEA.

I stand by that because I was involved with the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) when I was in the state legislature. I was also involved with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), an educational organization that was challenged by the leadership of New York in the state courts. We hired out-of-state attorneys to fight the state education battles that were eventually going to fall into our laps anyways and we simply delayed progress. In good times, had we started earlier, New York would have been farther ahead with the needs of its students if it had functioned quickly rather than challenging it in the courts as we did—often times with out-of-state attorneys being paid to fight New York’s battles. So, I did not find that as a pleasant experience for our children but that whole process taught us something—we need to invest more money in those areas where children have high need in the classroom and where parents at home have an inability to pay. I think that is fundamental and if we cannot get it done in state capitals, then the best place to do it is in Washington—where we are a step removed from that political awkwardness and we can better drive the progress where state capitals cannot simply get it done politically. We need to be there for Title I reform and adequate funding of Title I.

Then into the programmatic areas—we are trained in this country by mission statement to become the workforce of the future. If we are going to do that, however, our expectations for students ought to be that you as a student, sitting in the first grade today, are going to be in a number of years as a professional be working in a global marketplace. If that is true, some of the additives that you can bring to education would involve foreign language instruction. Any of the foreign language instructors that I speak to continually say that the best time to reach students is when they are in single-digit age groups—that is where they can best learn. In fact, educators of foreign language will tell you that they can identify exactly when that person learned that foreign language just by how they deliver that product. The sooner we can get to them the better. So if we are going to train students for a multiple-need global economy, give

them the language skills so they can flatter their competition, they can flatter their peers—then we can say we are building a sound infrastructure. I have legislation that would have done that here in New York; I moved onto Washington and we are working on such measures now. We think we should start in elementary settings, we should bring in not just the romance languages but some of the newest growth areas: bringing in Chinese dialects and Asian languages, and making certain we bring into the fray some of the African dialects and languages so that we can, again, train our students for tomorrow’s economy—this is absolutely essential.

As an engineer, I believe that science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) needs to be part of the progress. It is a problem right now that I think is measurably indicative of where we are falling off with the lack of emphasis in today’s curriculum on these subjects. We need to inspire young people, we need to connect them with science, technology, engineering and math curricula that, in all seriousness, can be effortlessly inserted into any elementary and middle and secondary formula. We can revise the curricula, and we can easily, in elementary settings, introduce discussions about such subjects as science and engineering. You can already whet the appetite of young minds by talking about different examples. Instead of two apples and three oranges equal five fruits, you can be talking about engineers and scientists and just insert language to get them thinking. We also need to have visits from the outside community into our schools. We are grossly underproducing when it comes to young women and girls in the elementary setting, as well as students of color, in the STEM subjects. So bring in the diverse panels of scientists or female engineers, let them talk to students and tell them about the joy, the fun, the excitement, and the enthusiasm of working in their fields. Bring them into the classrooms, create these teams—these really do not cost us money. I am confident that we can get volunteer efforts to make that happen. In fact, I am currently working on putting a panel together of diverse women in engineering that will walk into a classroom and have those little guys, the boys in an elementary setting, perhaps Caucasian boys, scratching their head saying: “Everyone of those people was an engineer and there was not one male in the group!” Just bring in engineers and speak generically about it and let students be impacted by the visual. Those are the things we need to do with STEM. As we plan, we need to highlight the connection between the private and
public sector workforce with the school setting so that we know what we should be training for, where we need to improve, and move forward.

I also believe we need to go forward with soundness of investment in areas like clean energy—an issue particularly key to this region. Here in Albany and Schenectady, we are growing a high-tech zone. The President recently came to visit here simply because we talk about this region all the time on the House of Representatives’ floor, and any time we have special orders, I am out there talking about the new revolution, the energy revolution, that is taking place in this district. This congressional district houses Schenectady, New York, which was the birthplace of electricity—the first energy revolution—and now we are geared and ready to go. We have the largest investment in the United States of global foundries here in this region as well as the largest investment right now in high-tech chip-manufacturing. Additionally, all sorts of work is going on with nanotechnology, semiconductors, and superconductive cables—all within this congressional district—this is seven counties worth of activity as well as a higher-education sector that provides cutting-edge opportunities for training and retraining workers, certification programs, and matriculation programs. All of that is happening with our institutions of higher-education in this region—with both private and public sector investments. I have personally told the President that we have the available tenant space for all sorts of high-tech, innovative concepts, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

The buzz words today in growing our economy are PTE: prototyping, testing, and evaluating. We have available space that was advanced by public sector investments from the State of New York as well as from state-of-the-art technology that came from private sector matching dollars. We have this ripe opportunity for tenants from across the country, and around the world, to come here and invest in a way that has all their capital needs met without having to dig deeply into their own pockets. We do, however, need to train that accompanying workforce—from Pre-K on up to twelve and then onto the higher education infrastructure. All of that needs to be part and parcel of our ESEA reauthorization. Those are the things that we need to be focusing on. There are, of course, other elements involved such as assessment and evaluation of our system, competitiveness, and accountability. All of that can come, but if we do not develop a foundation strong enough—we are going to be in deep trouble.
Now, one of the areas where I have some disagreement with current federal education policy is my thinking on charter schools. I do not think we can sustain two systems through public dollars. We have created competition in a way with charter schools, but I do not think it is a level playing field. This city alone, this capital city in New York, is saturated with charter schools. They are getting drowned out, they are getting suffocated. Talk about property tax payer sorrow, wow! It is huge in this town. People tell me that they only want successful charter school but I say that if you do Title I investment and Title I reform, and if you come across with a kind of soundness for foundation reform—you will not have schools set up for failure. I am an engineer; it probably takes an engineer to determine what happens in our education formula concerning the distribution of resources in this state. It should not be so convoluted, it should be straight-forward. Where there is economic need, simply invest. It should not matter on which side of the tracks you go to school in order to “get” the good schools. There is a way to advance fairness before we set up these weak schools for failure.

So with the Department of Education’s “Race to the Top” Program, there are many great aspects to it. I am not, however, a fan of charter schools—I will admit it and most people know my track record regarding that issue. I have seen too much investment in the market by these charter schools using tax payer dollars to advance their cause with the rules for both settings not being the same. If, however, we can bring the certainty, if we can bring the fairness to our education policy for our children, for our parents, and for our partners in education—whatever that nurturing environment that surrounds the student is—then we can say we have achieved, and achieved well.