



Open Letter to the Next President of the United States

October 22, 2008

We—the leaders of America’s Great City Schools—envision a time in which the nation educates all our children, holds high expectations for them, appreciates their diversity, invests in their futures, and welcomes their participation in the American dream. We believe that you share the same vision, for it is one that is already being realized for many children. But for others—particularly those who are poor, African American, Latino, Native American, disabled or learning English—that vision is a cruel hoax.

Too many children attending our inner-city schools are likely to see a future marked by more second-rate jobs, jail cells, emergency rooms, and wasted ambitions than the country’s abundant wealth can hide. A nation that cared for its children, expected the best of them, appreciated their diversity, invested in their futures, and welcomed their participation in the American dream would not have let this happen. But happen it did, and now the pledge to banish inequality with all deliberate speed and ensure the civil rights of all has dissolved into decades of empty promises.

As a result, the nation is more fractured and uncertain as it faces some of the most profound challenges than it has ever encountered: economic upheaval, dwindling energy supplies, environmental collapse, income inequality, inadequate health care, out-of-control entitlement spending, international competition and conflict, rising unemployment, eroding housing markets, and more.

Public education cannot fix these problems directly, but it is at the heart of our nation’s capacity to do so. Yet, too often, our schools have reflected—even perpetuated—some of the problems that we face, rather than overcoming them and teaching all our children to the highest standards. Turning this situation around so that public schools are the engine of problem solving rather than being viewed as the problem itself is one of our highest priorities as urban school leaders. This priority, we believe, warrants the closest attention from the next President of the United States.

Urban schools, of course, are at the core of every national debate about the status and future of public education. There is no conversation about achievement gaps, accountability, teacher quality, school facilities, or parental choice that is not also about urban education. In this arena, every educational challenge is more pronounced and every solution is more elusive.

Still, within this arena, there exists significant energy, commitment, and progress on which the next President can build. We are proud of the fact that school systems in America’s Great Cities have seen steady academic improvement over the last several years. The proportion of our fourth-graders reading proficiently on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (popularly called “The Nation’s Report Card”) has improved nearly 30 percent since 2002, and

the proportion of large central-city fourth-graders doing math proficiently has increased 40 percent since 2003, rates of gain that outpace those at both national and state levels. We have also strengthened our management and operations, improved transparency and accountability, and are working to regain the public's confidence and trust.

We would not contend, however, that our progress has been sufficient. The overall academic performance of our urban school systems is below state and national averages, and our racially identifiable achievement gaps remain wide, although they are not much wider than those of the nation at large. Our students and schools remain the major focus of state and federal accountability initiatives. Our high school dropout rates are unacceptable. We need to accelerate gains in student achievement; close our achievement gaps; recruit and retain thousands of effective teachers; repair our buildings; and stabilize our leadership. It is a huge challenge, but a challenge that is critical to America's future and the futures of millions of children.

We need a great deal from the next President of the United States in helping us meet these and other challenges, for we cannot meet them by ourselves. Here, specifically, is where we need your help.

First, we need a **positive tone** in the national discussion about urban education. The divisive and destructive rhetoric about urban public education—and the singling out of public schools in the cities—must come to an end. We deserve to be criticized when we fail and acknowledged when we improve. But the gratuitous denigration of urban education is neither motivating nor effective, and it sends destructive messages to the community about issues of race and class that are inaccurate and counterproductive. We believe that the next President can help set the tone by framing educational reform as a national challenge.

Second, we need a more cohesive **national urban policy** with public education at its core. The nation has lacked an urban policy for many years, a void that needs to be filled. Big-city schools and big-city mayors have worked hard over the last several years to forge stronger relationships and more coherent strategies for revitalizing our communities. Federal policy lags far behind in its ability to tie school reform and urban renewal together and to use one to strengthen the other. We believe the next President should help build this new cohesive national urban policy.

Third, we need a set of **American education standards** that clearly articulate what the nation expects our children to know and be able to do. These standards should be competitive with those anywhere in the world and should lay out what is required of our graduates in order for them to take their rightful places in higher education and the increasingly globalized economy. The current 50-state system of standards is inadvertently lowering our expectations for student achievement and exacerbating our achievement gaps. It is time for the nation to move towards national standards in education, with state testing systems that are tethered to those standards.

Fourth, we need to substantially amend *No Child Left Behind* and focus its provisions on **raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps**. The Council of the Great City Schools supported *No Child Left Behind* because we thought it was important to pair the goal of universal access to education with universal proficiency. The great civil rights battles that many in our membership helped wage were not fought over access to mediocrity. These battles were fought over access to excellence and the resources to attain it. *No Child Left Behind* was an important effort in trying to bridge these goals, but it devolved into a poorly calibrated exercise in compliance with overly rigid and punitive measures that failed to take academic progress or growth into account and ultimately had little to do with raising achievement or narrowing

achievement gaps. The next iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should retain a focus on accountability and closing racial and language achievement gaps. But the next version of the law should move beyond labeling to provide more instructional emphasis, more technical assistance, better research on what works, and a higher level of financial support. The new administration should start by reviewing and suspending all regulations that go beyond the letter of the law.

Fifth, we need your help with **attracting, recruiting, and retaining qualified and effective teachers** and leaders to meet the challenges of our urban schools. *No Child Left Behind* mandates that we hire only qualified teachers, but does nothing to solve the obstacles that we face in finding these teachers. Urban schools cannot compete with wealthier school systems in pay or working conditions. Federal assistance—through methods such as alternative certification; induction programs; smaller class sizes; differential, performance, or incentive pay—is necessary to attract, recruit, and retain highly effective teachers and leaders for the nation’s urban schools. We also need help in developing workable strategies in federal law so that our best teachers serve in schools with students who most need them.

Sixth, we need assistance in ensuring that our nation’s youngest children have access to **early childhood education**. Many children from poor families enter school with substantial unmet medical, psychological, social, and academic needs. The research is quite clear that early childhood programs, if done with an emphasis on child development between birth and age four, can make a huge difference in the later success of students.

Seventh, we need a comprehensive approach to reforming our **lowest-performing high schools** and stemming our **dropout rates**. Countless studies have identified the schools and communities with high dropout rates, elevating the rhetoric around our nation’s high schools and demonstrating the impact of these schools’ failures to meet the needs of at-risk students. The next President can boost current efforts for high school reform even further by directing the federal government to devote more resources, conduct more extensive research, and disseminate new information on effective practices for turning around secondary schools.

Eighth, our facilities are crumbling and in serious need of **repair, renovation and replacement**. The average school building across the country is close to 50 years old, and public schools are using an estimated 300,000 portable classrooms. Urban schools have fared even worse, and have long suffered from overcrowding, inadequate repair, and deferred maintenance. The impact of deficient facilities can be seen in areas from student performance to teacher recruitment and retention. Moreover, while local bond efforts have helped to improve learning conditions in urban school districts, state contributions are negligible and federal resources are almost nonexistent. Research has shown that a clean, safe, and modern learning environment is vital to help schools meet high standards, improve student test scores, and keep teachers and other instructional staff members focused on the children that they teach.

Ninth, we need a sustained effort by the federal government to increase **funding for the education programs** that serve the nation’s neediest students to reduce resource inequities across the country. Resource disparities undercut the ability of schools to teach all children to the same high standard. Despite educating greater numbers of poor students, English language learners, and children with disabilities, inner-city schools commonly have significantly less funding per child than the average suburban school. A slowing economy and the ensuing state and local budget cuts have exacerbated financial problems of cities. We encourage the next President to work with Congress to ensure that an ongoing increase in federal support is available for school districts to raise standards and implement and maintain successful instructional practices.

Tenth, we urge you to **celebrate the diversity** that is central to the mission of urban education, and is at the heart of the values of this proud democracy. The Great City Schools represent the America of the 21st century, enrolling some 32 percent of the nation’s African American students, 26 percent of its Hispanic students, 29 percent of the nation’s English language learners, and 24 percent of its poor children. We urge you to use us—the nation’s urban schools—as a model of tolerance and inclusion and a **focal point for continuing the nation’s dialogue on race and language**.

Finally, we ask that you give serious consideration to **appointments** in your administration, particularly those to the Department of Education, to ensure that they include people who have experience in the urban setting and who reflect the racial and language diversity of our communities. The pool of leaders, managers, administrators, and instructional talent within urban education is outstanding. We also urge you to meet regularly with urban school leaders once you assume office to ensure that our respective efforts are moving in the same direction.

The Great City Schools are on record in support of raising student achievement, closing achievement gaps, and being accountable for results. We will continue to support these priorities, even when the challenges appear immense and success seems out of reach. We do so because we have seen these schools make progress and know that more is possible. It is vital that we succeed, given that our fortunes are tied inextricably with those of the nation and our urban children.

We ask you, as the next President of the United States, to work with us to make urban public education the best in the world. Thank you and best wishes as you assume the mantle of leadership as the 44th President of the United States of America.

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