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Senate

Mr. President, today we celebrate the first 100 days of our new President's administration. It's been somewhat less remarked upon, but this week also happens to mark my first 100 days in office.

Together, we have done important work in these 100 days. We have taken decisive action to get our economy moving again. We have provided better access to health care for our children. We have made the workplace fairer for women.

And for me, these 100 days have provided a remarkable opportunity to listen to Coloradans. In dozens of town hall meetings, in each and every corner of the state, in cities and small towns, in good weather and bad, I have listened to thousands of Coloradans -- young and old, Republicans, Democrats and Independents, teachers, nurses, farmers, workers ranchers, and small business owners-- people from all walks of life with every conceivable point of view.

And I have been struck by how much -- despite the trials we face at this moment in our history and despite whatever disagreements we might have -- more than anything the people of Colorado long to build a better future for the next generation.

Mr. President, America has always embraced the promise of a better life for our children.

My family's story is no different. After their lives were shattered by World War II, my grandparents set their sights on Franklin Roosevelt's America as the one place they could rebuild their lives. And it was.

My mother had even more opportunities than my grandparents dreamed, and she and my father were able to create a better life for me, my brother, and my sister. Since our

Founding, generation after generation, we have worked to form a more perfect union, always fulfilling the promise of a better life for those who come after us.

Yet now, that promise is in question.

I am here today Mr. President as the father of three young daughters of my own-- Caroline, Halina and Anne. I think of them and worry that we are at risk of being the first generation of Americans to leave less opportunity than we, ourselves, were given.

Our economy is in turmoil. 5.1 million Americans have lost their jobs since the beginning of this crisis, and our unemployment rate is at 8.5 percent and rising. Between 2000 and 2007, median family income in this country actually declined by more than \$300 and during about the same period, the cost of health care rose by nearly 80% and the cost of higher education by roughly 60%.

The gulf between rich and poor has gotten wider. Americans are now less likely than people living in a number of other industrialized countries to improve their economic status in their lifetime. As many as 100 million Americans now live in families earning less in real terms than their parents did at the same age.

Mr. President, this crisis stemmed from much more than foreclosed houses and credit swaps. It is a symptom of this generation's lack of attention to the legacy of our grandparents, who built for the future. And now, we must ask ourselves who we will be as a country when we emerge from this crisis. Will we answer the call of this time, or will we fall back on the same tired arguments of the past?

This time demands that we cast our eyes to the future, that we take a 21st century approach to meet our 21st century challenges and seize our 21st century opportunities. With President Obama's leadership and our resilient American spirit, we can emerge from this crisis stronger and truer to our creed than when we entered it. Each generation of Americans with hope for their children has courageously shed old ways of thinking and, on their behalf, reached out to new ideas. We are no different. We too, must be willing to abandon our commitments to the weary forms of the past and attend to the future. That is our cause.

We have to address critical, structural issues stifling our economy and threatening our children's opportunities. We need to pursue comprehensive financial reform that will prevent the kind of recklessness that got us into this mess. We have a rising deficit, and we must bring discipline to our budgets, even as we invest in the future. We have a unique opportunity this year to drastically reform our health care system, and

control its skyrocketing costs, and we must seize it. It's time to invest in the new energy economy and break our dependence on foreign oil.

And, if we are going to emerge from this economic crisis and succeed in the long run, we must **fundamentally** change public education in this country.

Throughout our history, public schools have allowed America to make good on her promise to the next generation. Our schools propelled our children toward their parents' aspirations and prepared them to rise to the challenges of their times.

Now, if we are honest with ourselves, we see that our public schools too often become traps, traps that perpetuate a cycle of poverty and foster mediocrity. Our children, my girls and millions of others like them, are attending schools that were built to prepare their grandparents for an economy that no longer exists.

Our public education system, as designed, does not work well enough for all children in this country, and, for our poorest children, barely works at all.

Across America 1.2 million children drop out of high school every year. Globally we rank 20th among industrialized nations for high school graduation rates. Forty years ago we were first.

70% of our country's 8th graders can't read at grade level.

On average, a nine year-old from a low income family is already 3 years behind their high income peers, has a 1 in 2 chance of graduating from high school, and a 1 in 10 chance of finishing college.

And, despite many efforts to close our stubborn achievement gap, a report released yesterday shows we have made almost no progress.

How can we as Americans accept this reality, especially when none of us here would accept these odds for our own children? Mr. President, these are our children, too.

There are teachers throughout the country that have rejected the defeatism that too many of us have accepted for our schools. They have come in early, and stayed late. They have visited their students' houses and bought their own supplies from their own pockets. They have expected more from their students than their students knew to expect of themselves.

Yet too many of us, have accepted the existing odds, considering them a natural consequence of poverty. And at the same time we have entered into tiresome debates, debates that take ideology seriously and the fates of our children lightly.

Children's futures have been wasted while adults have endlessly debated techniques for assessing failing schools, instead of changing or closing schools that are obviously failing on every dimension that can be assessed.

We have debated modest and incremental reforms, instead of doing the hard work of identifying successful school structures and human capital strategies and taking them to scale. And we have been stuck debating whether teachers should be paid more based on merit, while roughly half of our teachers quit in the first five years of their career.

A narrow, small politics has allowed us to duck ever making real choices about anything. And it has, failure after failure, shriveled our shared ambition for America's children.

As long as we have these same conversations, today's 9 year olds will see their younger brothers and sisters enter 4th grade with the same low odds of graduating from college they have; just as they saw their older brothers and sisters face the same odds. Generation after generation.

When I took over as the Superintendent for Denver Public Schools, in a school district of 75,000 children -- only 33 African American students and 61 Latino students -- fewer than four classrooms worth of kids -- scored proficient on the state's 10th grade math test. A test that measures a junior high school standard of proficiency in Europe.

Spending time with our students and their families in Denver, I was struck not by their fragility, but by their resilience. Their parents—like many before them-- had made tremendous sacrifices to provide their children with greater opportunity. The students I knew were willing to work harder, and stay in school longer. We were selling them short.

I joined the Denver Public Schools with kind of an abstract understanding that what was happening in our schools was unfair. My experience there left me with a profound sense of urgency to change what *is* unfair and fundamentally unjust. We can do better, and we will do better. In Denver we have made progress.

From 2005 to 2008, Denver students scored higher in reading, math, writing and science.

We did not get there by doing things the same way as they had been done before.

We closed failing schools and opened new ones.

We implemented a groundbreaking teacher pay system that rewards teachers who improve their students' performance and provides incentives for teachers to go the neediest schools. We accomplished this change by working with the union. It took a lot of effort and we had a lot of disagreements, but we made progress together because of a fundamental commitment by all of us to get the job done, not just score political points.

With the leadership of our Mayor and our city council, voters expanded our early childhood education. As a result, this year there are 1500 more 4 year olds in full day programs, a 300% increase. We increased full-day kindergarten by 25%, so that for the first time more than 90% of our 5 year olds have the benefit of a full day of school. Research tells us that there is no smarter investment we can make.

And in 2008, we launched a School Performance Framework that measures the progress of actual students year over year throughout their career— rather than the meaningless measurement of one year's class against the next year's class.

We still have work to do in Denver. There is still a long way to go before these reforms materially change the odds for all of our students. But we are moving in the right direction. And other districts will see similar success if we support reform efforts that work.

Our job in the Senate should be to help the Administration spur innovation and identify and expand what works. I look forward to working with our Education Secretary Arne Duncan, my colleagues here, Mr. President I'm happy to that former Secretary of Education from Tennessee is here, as well as parents, teachers, students and community members in Colorado, to support innovative solutions to the problems plaguing our schools.

Our commitment to our children and grandchildren requires that we hold ourselves to a higher standard than we have in the past.

This is not a time to spend new money on old programs, or to timidly attempt changes that have already failed too many of our children.

Now is the time to re-imagine our schools as magnets for talent, centers for communities, and incubators of innovation. Only then can we ensure that our students are getting the 21st century skills that will equip them for the new economy.

Attracting Talent

We must do the same for our teachers. As President Obama said just yesterday, “In a global economy where the greatest job qualification isn't what you can do but what you know, our teachers are the key to our nation's success; to whether America will lead the world in the discoveries and the innovations and economic prosperity of this new century.”

Study after study has shown that nothing makes a greater difference to student learning than great teaching.

We need to support effective teachers and make sure they stay in the classroom. That means creating school environments where teachers—and students—want to spend time. And it means restructuring our schools and school calendars so teachers have time to plan together and learn from each other.

And, we need to pay teachers in a way that rewards their success and provides incentives for them to stay in the profession. More fundamentally, we need to recognize that our system of hiring, compensation, and training designed, deep in the last century, is utterly inadequate for 21st century labor market realities. In 1960, a gallon of gas cost 30 cents, Elvis and the Everly Brothers were atop the charts. A first year lawyer earned about the same as a first year teacher. And women basically had two professional choices: becoming a nurse or going into the classroom. In 2009, as nation after nation moves past us in educational achievement, we're kidding ourselves if we think a teacher recruitment and retention plan that came in when the hula hoop went out – and effectively subsidized our schools by limiting women's opportunities – is a serious response to America's needs.

We must invest in proven training that equips teachers with the content knowledge and classroom management skills to be successful in helping their students. And we need to ensure that we provide ongoing, high-quality professional development opportunities that actually help them do a better job in the classroom. Otherwise, we will risk losing our best teachers.

We need to expand alternative pipelines for teachers, to enhance the traditional pathways we already have.

President Obama has called on the nation to create a new army of teachers. We must recruit a diverse, excellent, and committed group of Americans to teach our children.

The talent is all around us—in the veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the baby boomers who have spent their careers running successful businesses or working in manufacturing or medicine or law, and the college graduates looking to find a rewarding vocation—all of whom can inspire and challenge our students to become the engineers who will build green cities, the doctors who will cure cancer, and the entrepreneurs who will start businesses we can't yet even imagine.

As we open up the profession to allow talented and committed people to become teachers, we must have rigorous selection for every spot in front of a class, and replicate effective training for new teachers.

21st Century Standards

Mr. President as we work with states and districts to redesign our schools for the 21st Century, we should do so in conversation with business and labor to inform our efforts about what skills the market will require. Competitive workers must be problem solvers rather than test takers. They must be able to think critically and communicate effectively in multiple mediums.

Students won't need to write cursive, they will need to know how to use technology to solve tough problems. They don't need only to memorize facts, they need to understand how to filter and use the information at their fingertips.

We need updated standards that reflect these 21st Century skills. We should invite states to embrace voluntary national standards, benchmarked against international norms that allow the public to really see the progress students are actually making from year to year. We need an accurate measuring system so that we know when reforms are working and when students are achieving. We need to ensure that the tests we give kids ask them to deploy the knowledge and skills they have, rather than demonstrate their ability to take a test. And, we must ensure that when we do give students tests, teachers get the results in time to use them to drive their instruction.

Centers for Communities

But our tests shouldn't be the sole driver of our instruction. We should look beyond the narrow window of standardized test scores, to parent and community engagement and student retention rates. We should expand early learning opportunities to start earlier, be broader in scope, and beckon everyone in the community.

Our schools should become centers where communities gather for skills and services. Schools are uniquely positioned to deliver health and support services. Research shows a statistical link between nutrition and achievement for all students. We need to look at nutrition in schools not as something extra, but as central to student success.

Incubators for Innovation

Our schools should be on the cutting edge of using new technology for both teaching and learning. Technology can connect students to resources, and teachers to each other. Effective use of technology can allow a teacher in a rural area to get feedback from a mentor elsewhere. And we should be using technology to disseminate effective practices, and share great lesson plans. We can look to technology to help train teachers in new ways, by simulating classroom experiences and delivering real-time feedback on lesson plans.

And, Mr. President there's just something wrong when students who enter the schoolhouse find they are moving backwards in time – leaving behind all the technology that in the rest of their day expands and enriches their lives.

And, while we know we can't fix our schools by spending more money on the same inadequate programs, we must commit to funding what works in our schools. And we now have the largest investment in public education in history with which to do it. The stimulus package and the budget are working in tandem to increase access to early childhood education. States and districts are competing with one another to build on their efforts to revamp standards and turn around failing schools. There are additional resources to reduce high school dropout rates and increase college graduation rates.

If we continue to spark this kind of innovation, if we can allow ourselves to think big again about education, we can start to imagine school buildings as prototypes for energy efficiency. And classrooms as job training centers for the new energy economy -- preparing parents and students alike. School-based health care can advance from one nurse stretched between multiple schools to clinics that are leaders in efficient health care. School lunches can progress from packaged feedings in the cafeteria to lived lessons on nutrition and wellness. In sum, our schools can become what they should be -- the institutions that are preparing our children and their children to lead in the 21st Century.

Our cause is clear. It is time to for policies that serve not the ideologies of adults but the needs of our kids. I will be working in the coming months to develop legislation that will outline ways in which the federal government can better support our states

and school districts in providing a public education that meets the challenges and possibilities of our times.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, as well as with parents, teachers, students and community leaders across Colorado to ensure that we do our part to increase opportunity for our children.

We will know we have succeeded when we see not only more students graduating high school, but more of those graduates going on to complete college as well. We will not only see the achievement gap shrink, but we will see the United States once again lead the world in academic achievement.

Mr. President, we are lucky. In our time, history is once again beginning to run in the direction of change. We have the chance to honor our grandparents' example, and move forward together to create a better future for our children.

If we do, those children, and their children, will say that we rose to the moment. That we laid down our adult burdens and our differences to lift up our country instead. Let them say that a spark flew in America in this new century that ignited a generation of educators, children, parents and communities and gave them courage to abandon the status quo for a better future. Let our schools once again be the cradle of the American Dream and act to fulfill the solemn promise of one generation to the next.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.