

**To:** The Next President

**From:** Doug Ross, Superintendent of the University  
Preparatory Academy, Detroit

**Re:** Closing the Graduation Gap by Giving  
Schools Greater Autonomy

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Public education is mainly a state and local responsibility, but over the past quarter-century it has become a national problem. The main reason is a stubbornly persistent achievement gap between middle-class and low-income students, a gap that belies America's promise of equal opportunity even as it weakens our country's ability to win in global markets.

Closing that gap, as your White House predecessors realized, will require determined presidential leadership. What's exciting today is that we finally have some solutions.

While our most advantaged children must be expected and supported to do better academically in light of the rising achievement levels of Chinese, Indian, and Russian schoolchildren, the central education challenge confronting us involves the children of the poor.

Fareed Zakaria, in his thoughtful book *The Post-American World*, points out that the top-achieving two-thirds of American students are quite competitive on international academic tests. The problem that threatens American prosperity, Zakaria argues, is our failure to adequately educate the bottom third of our students.



That this bottom-achieving third consists largely of urban, low-income African-American and Latino kids raises this challenge beyond the economic. While we may not like to admit it, a mother's race and income remain powerful predictors of a child's academic performance. To put it simply, educating poor kids is the civil-rights issue of our time.

Despite the economic and moral imperative to act, our past efforts to dramatically improve the education of poor children seem to offer little encouragement. Last summer, the New York City schools celebrated an increase in the high-school graduation rate from 49 percent to 51 percent. According to a recent study by Michigan State University, my hometown of Detroit has a graduation rate of 32 percent—and only 25 percent for boys!

Virtually every large urban public-school system in America posts such abysmal results. No major city seems able to educate its poor children at levels comparable with middle-class suburban systems.

Beneath these discouraging urban high-school graduation rates, there exists some remarkably hopeful news.

A growing number of public, general-admission high schools in big cities across America have developed new school designs that produce high-school graduation and college-enrollment rates equal to those found in affluent suburban settings.

University Prep, the charter public school I helped start in Detroit eight years ago, graduated 93 percent of its entirely African-American, overwhelmingly poor senior class in June 2007, and enrolled 91 percent of those graduates in college or technical school.

Furthermore, those students have re-enrolled for their second year of college at rates nearly double those expected for African-American students, and above the Michigan statewide average for all freshmen.

Even more exciting is the fact that these graduation and college enrollment rates are not just a single-school phenomenon. I could take you on a tour tomorrow of 50 other public general-admission high schools nationwide that are achieving results as impressive as anything we have seen at University Prep—with demographically similar student populations.

But these successful urban schools do have several characteristics in common:

1. The truly successful schools take full responsibility for motivating urban students to learn. These schools refuse to take themselves off the hook just because their students may live in poverty, come from disorganized families, or arrive with poor academic preparation.

Such schools do what it takes to create powerful relationships between students and teachers. These standout schools individualize learning to make sure students who have persistently failed in school have positive learning experiences that build the self-confidence necessary to continue their studies. Students get regular exposure to work settings and successful people in the community to build both aspiration and a network of adults who can help.

*The most important single trait these successful urban schools share is the absolute commitment to providing the motivation that a student needs to persist and do the hard work required to graduate.*

2. High-performance urban public schools realize that school culture trumps everything—that creating a school environment where achievement, aspiration, and hard work are socially valued and rewarded is the necessary condition for having a successful urban school. All of these schools obsessively emphasize that all of their students will learn and that, of course, all will graduate and go on to college or technical school.
3. These schools make it their business to know how each student is doing academically and socially at all times—and to act on that knowledge. If you don't know that one of your ninth-graders is stuck at a fifth-grade reading level and is fast losing confidence, or that another just lost her mother to a drive-by shooting, you won't keep those kids in school, much less send them to college. Successful schools know each of their students as individuals.
4. Successful urban schools have rigorous college-preparatory curricula that strive to prepare all their students to be competitively college ready. They do not track students because they realize that every child needs the skills required of college freshmen whether they attend universities, pursue occupational certificates in community colleges or technical schools, or enroll in apprenticeship programs.

A story from Detroit illustrates this principle. Dejuan was a bright and charming young man at our high school who, at 16, suddenly stopped coming to school. His father reported he had no idea where Dejuan was, and seemed indifferent to his fate. Dejuan's mother had abandoned him years before, save for a brief period when she returned to claim custody—only to have him incarcerated in a juvenile facility for incorrigibility.

The school offered a \$50 reward for anyone who could provide information about Dejuan's whereabouts. A student came forward and indicated he was living in an abandoned house with several friends on the east side of the city. Dejuan's teacher-advisor, who had worked closely with him since the ninth grade, drove to the house. Once there, she told him he needed to return to school and that she would help him find a place to live. Dejuan resumed his studies and moved in with one of our male teachers and his wife.

As a result of these extraordinary interventions by University Prep teachers, Dejuan graduated from high school with his class and received a full-tuition scholarship from a local university. Every school graduating large percentages of their urban students can relate dozens of similar stories.

So, there they are—the four broad strategies that successful urban schools tend to have in common. What's keeping us from implementing these strategies in every disadvantaged school in the nation? What's keeping us from moving quickly and boldly to begin graduating at least 90 percent of all poor children in America from high school and sending at least 90 percent on to college and technical school?

In a word, politics—which ought to be encouraging for the man who is president of the United States.

In my view, there are two main prerequisites for replacing obsolete factory-style middle and high schools in our big cities with high-performance schools.

The first prerequisite is autonomy. Virtually all of these successful schools are managed by their principals and teachers. They hold themselves directly responsible for their

students' success, and have the power to alter curriculum and learning strategies as they see fit. In other words, these schools are site-managed.

Reform, then, means shifting power wholesale to the individual schools from the large central bureaucracies that currently direct every big-city school system. These central bureaucracies refuse to give up control, because they understand that doing so would result in their own demise. Who can blame them? Few of us start the call for revolution with our own letters of resignation. Power has to be taken from them politically.

The second prerequisite is the abolition of tenure as we know it. In nearly all successful urban schools, the principal formally or informally controls who works at the school—in short, principals at these schools have genuine power to hire and fire. On a formal, districtwide basis, this means teacher unions giving up the old seniority-centered advancement system. Most union leaders haven't figured out how to abandon this long-cherished system and get re-elected. They need political help.

Without presidential leadership, it appears unlikely that entrenched opposition to such vitally important reforms will be overcome.

A president elected with a mandate for educational change could lead the effort to eliminate the high-school dropout crisis from American life, and create a path to success for millions of young people.

Here are three thoughts on how you might proceed:

- Let the American people and the Congress know that this is an urgent problem that actually has a solution, and demon-

strate that solution by visiting successful urban schools in every region of the country. Since the federal government can't redesign local schools directly—and should not even be tempted to engage in what is inherently a highly decentralized process—the bully pulpit is the most powerful presidential resource for bringing about necessary school reform.

- The penalties in the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) should be supplemented with some positive incentives for reform. Over the past half-decade, the penalties for failing urban schools have become little more than manageable irritants for big-city districts. NCLB could be amended to give failing urban systems a financial incentive to replace a failing school with a school design that is proven to benefit students with similar demographics. Michigan just appropriated money for a 21st Century School Fund that offers a set of financial incentives to do exactly this.
- Strategies for overcoming bureaucratic opposition to site-managed schools could be devised by regional and state partnerships convened by the president in collaboration with governors, business executives, and civic leaders who understand the urgent need to do something about high dropout rates.

While we know how to graduate poor children and send them to college—how to get them “in the game”—most of us don't yet know how to help them play that game competitively. With a few exceptions, even relatively successful urban schools still don't send their students to college as well-prepared as their suburban counterparts.

Until we can close that gap, we still aren't providing the real equal educational oppor-

tunity our students deserve. This is our next big challenge. The good news is that a small but growing number of urban schools are beginning to demonstrate some impressive progress in closing this gap.

Having said that, what we do know constitutes an enormous source of opportunity for America's urban children. Now we need to make sure that all urban schools are able to implement this knowledge, even as we work to overcome the final barriers to equal educational outcomes for minority kids.

So many of our pressing national problems lack clear solutions. Fortunately, that

is no longer the case with urban education. We know how to engage low-income children in education, graduate them from high school, and send them to college and technical studies. The replacement of failing urban schools with these powerful new school designs promises to change America in ways as profound as the Homestead Act, the GI Bill, and the Voting Rights Act.

All of these historic acts of legislation gave Americans new power to shape their own destinies. Enabling millions of low-income children to graduate from college follows in that proud tradition.



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