



NEWS RELEASE

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Tuesday, January 20, 2015
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ARTHUR LEVINE: TONIGHT, PRESIDENT OBAMA’S SPEECH SHOULD INCLUDE IMPORTANCE OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS, NEED TO IMPROVE TEACHER EDUCATION

Woodrow Wilson Foundation President Offers Recommendations for How SOTU Can Issue National Call to Improve Public Education

PRINCETON, NJ (January 20, 2015) – When President Barack Obama delivers his State of the Union address this evening, he will likely make mention of education and recent investments to improve opportunity and close achievement gaps. To ensure teacher education receives the attention in the SOTU it deserves, following is recommended text from Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and former president of Teachers College Columbia University, for how President Obama can speak about the importance of teacher preparation this evening in a way far more meaningful than in previous addresses:

“Six years ago, I assumed the presidency promising to strengthen our economy and our nation by improving our schools. Since then, states have strengthened their standards and expectations for all our schools and more of our children are again firmly on the path for achieving the American dream.

We have pledged to have the highest percentage of college graduates in the world. And we have recommitted ourselves to ensuring that every child graduates from high school truly ready for the challenges and opportunities in both college and career.

While working to improve access to college for all those who complete high school, we have also increased access to financial aid, ensuring that no deserving learner is denied a chance at postsecondary education solely because of cost.

Now, while Congressional leaders are hard at work on improving the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and strengthening support for our school districts and schools, we must focus our collective attentions on an often-neglected piece to ensuring an excellent public education for all children – effective teacher education.

Later this year, Education Secretary Arne Duncan will release strong new regulations to strengthen those programs that prepare our nation’s teachers. Such direction is long overdue. While we all acknowledge the importance of great teachers, we have done little to ensure that those entering the profession are truly prepared for the work ahead of them.

We know that a great teacher is the most important factor in student success. We also know that ill-prepared educators can be one of the most significant stumbling blocks to learning achievement. That is particularly true in high-need schools, where great teachers are needed the most, and found the least.

In the strongest terms, our children cannot realize their potential if they do not have excellent teachers. And those teachers do not arrive at the schoolhouse door by accident or magic. They demand strong preparation programs that focus on their mastery of content, meaningful experiences in the classroom, and strong support from those exemplary educators already in the classroom.

That is why, in addition to strengthening those regulations directed at our schools of education and other teacher preparation programs, I am directing the U.S. Department of Education to take specific steps to ensure we not only have strong teacher education efforts, but that we are producing stronger, more effective teachers than ever before.

To achieve this, we must recruit our best and brightest into the teaching profession. We must work with school districts to ensure we are preparing teachers for the subjects and grades that are needed, to fill needs and gaps as they arise. We must provide prospective and new teachers with the strong mentoring necessary to ensure their success. And we must take specific efforts to retain great educators, helping them see that teaching is a career and not just a step along the job ladder.

Our success in this area is not just the responsibility of the federal government. There is only so much Congress can do, there are only so many dollars we can spend, and there are only so many times we can use the federal bully pulpit to call for change.

Real change and innovation comes from the leadership of our states, with governors taking specific actions to get excellent teachers into their high-need schools. It means empowering states and localities to do what is best, while holding all accountable for school, teacher, and student success.

As a nation, we have made a major shift from the 20th century's analog, industrial economy to a 21st-century global, digital economy. Even with such transition, we still tell our children that if they work hard, if they apply themselves, and if they commit to their education, they can achieve anything. We should all believe this to be true. It is the American way.

That American dream is still available to every child in our nation, regardless of race, family income, nation of origin, or zip code. That dream is only realized when every child has access to excellent teachers throughout the school years. And that can only be guaranteed if we take any and all steps to truly strengthen and improve our teacher education programs. We need to take significant action now to not only improve our colleges and universities, but also to dramatically improve the impact great teachers can have on the lives of tens of millions of young Americans each and every year."

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