Thanks.

Thank you so much.

Principal [Kim] Jackson - thank you so much for your leadership. [Teacher] Josefina [de Campos Salles], also, thank you so much for what you’re doing every single day. And I don’t say this lightly, I think D.C. is blessed to have one of the best urban superintendents in the nation – please give Kaya Henderson a huge round of applause. And please give Wade Henderson a round of applause – his moral leadership is simply extraordinary.

And finally, to all the educational leaders, to all the political leaders, and to members of Congress, thank you for what you do on a daily basis. Your talent, your time, and your commitment to give all of our nation’s children a chance in life – I can’t tell you how much that means to me personally.

Intro: LBJ

Fifty years ago today, President Lyndon Johnson called on Congress and the nation to establish "full educational opportunity as our first national goal."

President Johnson’s message introduced our country’s cornerstone education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

And when he signed that bill, he said, "I believe deeply [that] no law I have signed, or will ever sign, means more to the future of America."

As is also true for all of us here today, President Johnson’s deep passion and belief came not from theory, or politics, or ideology; it came from what he had seen with his own eyes.
As a 20-year old, he had interrupted his college studies to teach in an elementary school in south Texas that had no lunch hour, no school bus and no playground.

Every student there was Mexican-American, poor, and spoke little or no English.

Recalling that experience, Johnson said, "I made up my mind that this Nation could never rest while the door to knowledge remained closed to any American."

What moved Johnson, also moves all of us here – real children, for whom educational opportunity must be their one chance at a better life, being denied that chance. That lack of opportunity is not just heartbreaking, it is educational malpractice, it is morally bankrupt, and it is economically self-destructive to our nation’s self-interest.

Today, half a century later, as it contemplates moving towards a new ESEA, Congress faces the same choice that Johnson faced. One path continues to move us towards that life-transforming promise of equity; the other walks away from it.

For all of our children, for their families, their communities, and ultimately, for our nation, let’s choose the path that makes good on the original promise of this law. Let’s choose the path that says that we, as a nation, are serious about real opportunity for every single child.

I believe we can work together – Republicans and Democrats – to move beyond the out-of-date, and tired, and prescriptive No Child Left Behind law.

I believe we can replace it with a law that recognizes that schools need more support – and more money, more resources – than they receive today.

A law that recognizes that no family should be denied preschool for their children, and reflects the real scientific understanding that learning begins at birth, not somehow at age 5.

A law that recognizes the critically hard, important work educators across America are doing to support and raise expectations for our children, and lifts up the profession of teaching by recognizing that teachers need better preparation, better support, and more resources to do their hugely important job.

A law that says that educational opportunity isn’t an option, it’s a civil right, a moral imperative, and the best way we can strengthen our nation and attract and retain great jobs that expand the middle class.

Like so many of you in this room, my wife and I are parents, with two children in local public schools.

What we, as parents, want for our kids is an education that isn’t just about knowledge – it’s about those moments of excitement that we hear about at dinner at the end of the day, about creativity and wonder and curiosity.

Fundamentally, we want our kids to have wonderful choices in their lives.

And let’s work together to pass a law that says that every single child in America deserves this kind of education that we’d want for our own children. The days in which lawmakers support schools that are somehow good enough for someone else’s children, but not for their own – those days must be over.

And please take a minute and think about both the magnitude of the opportunity, and the urgency of the work ahead of us.

The challenge to reauthorize ESEA: moving forward or turning back the clock
In building a new ESEA, we should celebrate America’s real progress toward “full educational opportunity,” while being absolutely honest that we have so much further to go to achieve that vision – and that it would be an enormous mistake to turn back now.

We must begin every conversation by looking at student achievement – nothing matters more. And the very encouraging news is that in so many measures, we’re making important progress. That progress is revealed in our highest-ever high school graduation rate, in the millions more now in college, in overall achievement gaps that are narrowing, and those gaps that are insidious along racial lines are shrinking.

It is striking to me, that today, black and Latino 9-year-olds are doing math at about the same level that their 13-year-old counterparts did in the 1970s.

In the last 15 years, leaders from both parties have agreed to focus on the progress of all students, and to take action when some fall behind. Opportunity gaps and brutal truths are swept under the rug less often, meaningful action is more frequent, and over the past 15 years, the difference for our nation’s children has been profound.

Today, a young Hispanic person is now half as likely to drop out of high school, and twice as likely to be enrolled in college.

The number of black and Hispanic students taking AP exams has increased nearly five-fold. Does that mean that black and Hispanic students today are 5 times smarter than they were before? Of course not – they simply have 5 times the opportunity to demonstrate their intelligence, their desire for rigorous coursework, their work ethic, and their commitment to building positive futures for themselves. For the first time, four out of five students are completing high school on time.

And black and Hispanic college enrollment is up by more than a million students since just 2008.

Think about what that increased educational opportunity means not just for the young people, but for their families for literally generations to come.

But for all that very real progress, as Wade said earlier, we cannot allow ourselves to believe that we are yet doing justice by all of our young people.

And frankly, everyone in this room here knows we are not even close, and the desire to right that wrong is what fuels the passion in so many of us.

We’re not there yet. Not when other countries are leaping ahead of us in preparing their children both for college and the world of work.

We’re not there yet when millions of children start kindergarten already too far behind simply because their parents couldn’t afford preschool.

Not when thousands of preschoolers are being suspended. And sadly, we know exactly who many of the 3- and 4-year olds often are – our young boys of color.

Not when a third of black students attend high schools that don’t even offer calculus.

Not when across the nation, far too many students of all races and all backgrounds take, and pass the required classes for high school graduation – and are still not qualified to go on to public university and take real college-level classes.

Collectively, we owe our children, and our nation, something so much better.
Together, let’s choose the path that expands opportunity for every child, strengthens our nation economically, improves resources for schools, and supports and helps to modernize the teaching profession itself, and let’s choose the right path forward.

The path forward

The path forward hews to core American ideals of fairness and justice. It recognizes that equal educational opportunity is a national priority, and a national responsibility.

In this year – when we estimate that the nation’s public schools have become majority-minority for the first time – equity and excellence matter more than ever.

I believe deeply in that mission. And I want to lay out for you a set of core beliefs that I think should form the foundation of a new ESEA:

I believe every single child is entitled to an education that sets her up for success in careers, college, and life.

I believe education cannot and should not be boiled down just to reading and math. I believe the arts and history, foreign languages, financial literacy, physical education, and after school enrichment are as important as advanced math and science classes. Those are essentials, not luxuries.

I believe that all students must be held to high expectations for learning, no matter their zip code, race or ethnicity, disability, or whether they are still learning English.

I believe that states should always choose those standards, as they always have, and that those standards should align clearly and honestly with what young people will need to know for success in school, in college, and in life.

In a globally competitive economy, that’s an absolute necessity for our children to have a secure future.

I believe that every single child deserves the opportunity for a strong start in life through high-quality preschool, and expanding those opportunities must be part of ESEA.

I believe that every family, and every community, deserves to know that schools are making a priority of the progress of all children, including those from low-income areas, racial and ethnic minorities, those with disabilities, those learning English, and others who all too often, historically, have been marginalized, and underserved, and undereducated.

And I believe they deserve to know that if students in those groups actually fall behind, that schools will take action to improve.

I believe that no student deserves to be cheated out of an education by being stuck in a school that fails too many of its students, year after year after year.

I believe that schools must be a pipeline to opportunity, not to prison.

I believe that we should create new incentives to catalyze bold state and local innovation in support of student success and achievement.

We should support leaders in the field to build on evidence and evaluate those efforts so that educators and policymakers can learn about what works and stop doing what doesn’t work.
We should support innovations in promising areas that increase equity – from building upon students’ hugely important social and emotional skills to effective parental engagement to expanding socio-economic integration of schools that benefits all of our children.

I believe that every single child deserves fair access to the resources of her school and her district – and access to excellent teachers and principals.

So much of this relies on the teachers, principals and other educators whose skills and passion are at the very heart of our students’ engagement and learning. So let me talk for a moment about what those educators deserve.

I believe all educators and principals need and deserve excellent preparation, support and opportunities for growth that go far beyond what exists in most places today. And I’m pleased to say, you’ll hear more about this when President Obama releases his budget.

I believe teachers and principals deserve to be paid in a way that reflects the importance of the work they do – regardless of the tax base of their surrounding community.

I believe teachers and schools need greater resources and funds. This year, President Obama’s Budget will include $2.7 billion for increased spending on ESEA programs, including $1 billion additional just for Title I. And we will fight to make sure Congress provides more resources as part of any effort to rewrite ESEA.

I believe those in low-income schools should have resources and support comparable to that in other schools. Our children and teachers, who need and deserve the most, cannot continue to receive the least.

I believe that all teachers deserve fair, genuinely helpful systems for evaluation and professional growth that identify excellence and take into account student learning growth.

Assessments – and they have to be good ones – are one indicator but they should be only one part of that picture.

I believe parents, and teachers, and students have both the right and the absolute need to know how much progress all students are making each year towards college- and career-readiness. The reality of unexpected, crushing disappointments, about the actual lack of college preparedness cannot continue to happen to hard working 16- and 17-year olds – it is not fair to them, and it is simply too late. Those days must be over.

That means that all students need to take annual, statewide assessments that are aligned to their teacher’s classroom instruction in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school.

But I think we need to do more to support schools, and educators, and families and students in this time of enormous change when so many states and districts are courageously raising the bar for student achievement.

Assessments, the tests themselves, have been and should be an important part of this debate. We must be very, very thoughtful here.

I am absolutely convinced that we need to know how much progress students are making – but we also must do more to ensure that the tests – and time spent in preparation for them – don’t take excessive time away from actual classroom instruction. Great teaching, and not test prep, is always what best
engages students, and what leads to higher achievement.

In many places, there are simply too many tests that take up too much time, and I know many educators and families and students are frustrated about that. We need to take action to support a better balance.

And that's why we will work with Congress to urge states and districts to review and streamline the tests they are giving and eliminate redundant and unnecessary tests, and provide support for them to do exactly that.

We'll urge Congress to have states set limits on the amount of time spent on state- and district-wide standardized testing, and notify parents if they exceed those limits.

We want to empower states to accelerate the efforts they are already taking on in this area – places like North Carolina and Maryland, under Lillian’s leadership, and New Mexico and Rhode Island – to carefully consider the tests students are required to take to make sure students have time to learn and teachers have time to teach.

Sometimes, educators are better at starting new things than we are at stopping things – several decades of testing ideas have sometimes been layered on top of each other in ways that are redundant and duplicative, and not helpful.

To help states and districts make these changes and come up with a more coherent strategy, the President will request funding in his budget to help improve the quality of tests and to get rid of those that are unnecessary.

The call for thoughtful change from educators and families has been absolutely clear. Let's hear them and take action.

Offering America’s students more, and supporting their teachers and principals better, won't happen because of wishful thinking or pretty political speeches and sound bites.

It will only happen because we, as a nation, make a deliberate choice for equity. A deliberate choice to insist on excellence for all of our nation’s students.

I promise you, this won’t be the easy path and it won’t be the past of least resistance. But I will quote one of my personal heroes, Marian Wright Edelman, who has fought for equal opportunity for half a century.

She simply puts it: "If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much."

**Opportunity Is Not Optional**

Yet there are some who believe not just that this fight is over, but that we should head in a very different direction.

And let me say clearly: I respect my Republican friends in Congress – and their commitment to education.

For example, there is a strong bipartisan interest in expanding support for high-quality, public charter schools. And governors in both parties have been great partners and leaders in improving education.

And I'm absolutely committed to continuing to work together. But if recent bills, and news accounts, and public statements are any guide, I’m deeply concerned about where some Republicans may be headed on ESEA.
I believe that we may have fundamental differences with some congressional Republicans about whether or not the quality of education for every child, regardless of their zip code of where they live, is an essential interest of our nation – or whether it is optional.

But I am by nature and optimist, and I do believe we can come together on these vital issues. I believe our best hope, and maybe our only hope is absolute honesty and transparency.

And that begins by asking hard questions:

Will we work together to ensure that every single child has access to high expectations for learning that will engage, and challenge, and prepare him or her for success in college, careers, and life? Or is that optional?

Will we work together to ensure every parent’s right to know every year how much progress her child is making in school? Or is that optional?

Will we work together to ensure that every public school makes a real priority of the educational progress of minority students, those living in poverty – be there rural, urban, or someplace else -- those with disabilities, those learning English, or other groups that have struggled in school in the past? Should unacceptable achievement gaps require action? Or is that simply optional?

What about schools where, year after year, huge numbers of students drop out or never learn to read?

Do families have the right to expect their leaders will put in place meaningful supports and a real plan for improvement? Or is that optional?

Will we work together to expand access to high-quality preschool, so students too many of our children don’t start school so far behind and our nation doesn’t lag so many of our international peers? Or is that optional?

I know, we all know, that we need to take a strong stand on a new ESEA and one that will let us answer "yes" for every child.

Educational opportunity cannot be optional for any child anywhere in this country. We need to stand strong for accountability that ensures that students are making progress, and that taxpayer dollars are producing real results for children.

And let me take a moment to say a few personal words about why this is so important.

**Taking responsibility**

In between my junior and senior year at college, I took a year off to help in my mother’s after-school tutoring program on the South Side of Chicago and figure out if I really wanted to devote my life to this fight for educational opportunity.

One of the students I tutored was a basketball player at the local high school, who was studying to take his ACT.

He was a great kid who had done all the right things. In a very violent neighborhood, he had stayed away from the gangs. He didn’t drink, he didn’t use drugs. He was actually an honor roll student with a "B" average, and on track to graduate. I initially thought this was absolutely a young man who could beat the odds and defy the negative stereotypes of young black men.
But as we started to work together, I was heartbroken to quickly realize that he was basically functionally illiterate.

He was reading at maybe a 2nd or 3rd grade level, and was unable to put together a written paragraph. Tragically, he had played by all the rules, but had no idea how far behind he was. Throughout his life, he had been led to believe that he was on-track for college success.

And he was nowhere close.

The educational system had failed him, and the buck stopped nowhere.

For decades, I asked you, how many millions of children, not lucky enough to be born with all the advantages, has that story of lost potential been repeated. What has that cost been to our country in terms of lost productivity.

As a nation, we owe our young people better. Let us not walk away from our responsibilities.

What does that mean in concrete terms?

It means schools, families and communities need to know what progress students are making in their learning.

It means that information to take action to serve students better – using that information, especially when kids are falling behind. As folks here know, the cost of academic failure has never been so high as it is today. It means figuring out which schools are doing well, and learning from them; and supporting those that need additional help. It’s about accountability.

And that’s why Senator Robert F. Kennedy amended the original ESEA, so that parents and communities would know how their schools were doing, and would know, based on objective measures, how disadvantaged students were performing each and every year.

And for a Republican party that has fought hard against wasting money, and has pushed for a focus on results for taxpayers, turning back the clock would be truly hypocritical.

This country can’t afford to replace “the fierce urgency of now” with the soft bigotry of “It’s somehow optional.”

**Turning back the clock**

And let me be very clear: if we walk away from responsibility as a country if we make our national education responsibilities somehow optional – we would turn back the clock on educational progress, 15 years or more.

Back to the days when, in too many places, the buck stopped nowhere for student learning.

Back to the days when expectations for how much a student should learn often depended on what side of town he or she lived on.

Back to the days when the only factor that never seemed to matter in teacher evaluation was if students were actually learning; and when parents and teachers had little information on how much progress students were making from year-to-year.
Back to the days when achievement gaps for black and Hispanic 4th-graders were 30 to 40 percent larger. When the high school graduation rate for the nation was stagnating.

When high school dropout rates were almost twice as high for African-Americans, and more than twice as high for Hispanic young people.

The moral and economic consequences of turning back the clock are simply unacceptable.

We would be accepting the morally and economically unsupportable notion that we have some kids to spare. We don’t.

For the sake of our national identity and the vitality of our economy, every single young person must be able to look forward to a future that holds promise.

And when so many states and districts have put in place the building blocks to sustain educational progress, when so many educators are working so hard every single day to raise the bar for their students and to support them in getting there, reversing course now would be a terrible, terrible mistake.

**Coming Together to Expand Opportunity**

The simple fact is, America’s educators already have done much of the hard work of raising and lifting up expectations for young people.

Teachers and principals have worked extraordinarily hard in leading some of the most far-reaching changes in public education in decades.

The challenges of changes this big are always going to be significant. But they’re paying off for our nation’s children.

Many of the places where this shift has been boldest and most sustained – places like right here in Washington, D.C. and Tennessee – those places have seen the most dramatic progress, and the fastest growth for children. Teachers, and parents, and school and community leaders and very importantly students themselves, are working together to make that real change, that real progress possible.

Let us here work together toward a law that will sustain, and accelerate, the enormous progress America’s educators have driven in recent years.

Let’s dispense with No Child Left Behind, and give states more flexibility.

No Child Left Behind created dozens of ways for schools to fail and very few ways to help them succeed, or to reward success. We need to do exactly the opposite.

Let’s work together on a law that fosters innovation, that advances equity and access, and supports children and educators.

A law that will help ensure that every young person in America is prepared for a future where success isn’t based just on what you know, but on what you can do with what you know.

In the end, there is much we can debate in ESEA reauthorization and areas for productive compromise.

But Congress must not compromise the nation’s vital interest of lifting up all students and protecting the vulnerable.

In America, education has been a bipartisan cause – and it must continue to be that.
We must continue to work together to ensure that education fulfills its great promise as the great equalizer for our children.

I look forward to continuing to work with Chairman Alexander and Senator Murray, and Chairman Kline and Representative Scott, and so many others, many here in the room today – to reauthorize and fix ESEA.

We are at an educational crossroads in America, with two distinct paths for moving forward.

This choice, this crossroads, has profound moral and economic consequences.

In making choices for our children’s future, we will decide who we are as a nation.

For the sake of our children, our communities, and our country, let's make the right choice. Thank you so much for all of your hard work.

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