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Guest Perspective: U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr.

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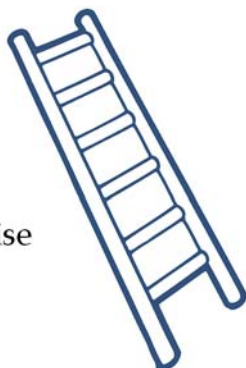
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I know you are all working hard to bring about the day when the quality of educational opportunities available to our children is not determined by their race or zip code, the language they speak at home or their family income, their immigration status, or whether they have a disability.

I also know that you believe, as I do, that education is a ladder. Rung by rung, it helps people reach places that would otherwise be an impossible climb.



When individuals have the chance to reach great heights, our society and way of life become stronger and better with every step they take.

So, today, I am here to ask you to act boldly on those beliefs. For all who believe that strong, equitable public education is central to a healthy democracy and a thriving economy, now is the moment for us to set aside the policy differences that we have let divide us, and move forward together courageously to defend and extend this fundamental American institution.



Speech Delivered on December 14, 2016
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You've seen the powerful results that courage and hard work can deliver. I've seen them too, throughout my career as a public school educator. I've seen them in the District of Columbia and in the 31 states I have visited since coming to Washington.

And, as you may know, my life offers more proof.

New York City public school teachers quite literally saved my life. During the period when I lost both parents at an early age, they gave me a haven. They challenged me with high expectations and a rich, well-rounded curriculum; they provided me with hope in a time of despair; they helped me thrive and become the person I am today.



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So, my commitment to this work is personal. It's also rooted in my background as a high school social studies teacher and a student of history.

American history, like all human history, includes advances toward and retreats from our highest ideals.

The history of public education in America also is a stutter-step toward ambitiousness, inclusiveness, equity and excellence. But, make no mistake; education has always been central to our progress. Education gave Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton the tools and the vision to transform a colonial outpost into a great and powerful nation that inspires people across the globe. It allowed William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass to challenge the institution of slavery. Education inspired Susan B. Anthony to demand the right of women to help shape our democracy with their votes. And it was education that helped Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis find the words and the bravery to inspire a generation to march toward a brighter and more equal future.

But the work of "forming a more perfect union" continues, as it ever has and always must.



We must continue to press on, firm in the knowledge that when we pull others up, they do not pull us down. When the light of opportunity shines on those who lack it, it does not dim for those already in its glow.

The light of opportunity shines more brightly and more widely today than it did eight years ago. Thanks to the hard work of teachers and leaders, students and families, policymakers and advocates, the graduation rate is 83 percent, an all-time high, achievement gaps are closing particularly in Science and the most recent college graduating class was the largest and most diverse in our history.

But, for all our progress, more is required to meet the challenges our nation will face in the years to come.

Too many students still don't finish high school, and when they do, too many aren't ready for college. The relationship between poverty and educational achievement in the U.S. is among the strongest in the world.

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Ensuring more Americans get the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in our country matters more than ever.

As recently as the 1970s, people with only a high school education could qualify for nearly three-quarters of the nation's jobs. Today, that number is below 40 percent.

One recent analysis found that 95 percent of the jobs created since 2008 required some postsecondary education or training. Think about that. If you didn't finish high school — or even if you graduated — you can knock on 95 doors looking for a job before one opens. And everyone else without higher education will be trying to squeeze through those last five doors alongside you.

It is not enough for those already prosperous to prosper. Unless we are ensuring that all Americans can meaningfully participate in our nation's growth, our nation will not succeed. The simple fact, confirmed by the research, is that reducing income inequality positively influences economic output. When everyone has a fair chance, whole societies are healthier, better off and more productive.

I know some will argue that equity conflicts with liberty. But it's not liberty when the happenstance of birth binds a child to a life of limited possibilities. True liberty is the opportunity to take our lives as far as our drive and talent allow.



The pledge of allegiance, heard in American classrooms each day, affirms that in this republic, liberty and justice are the dual and enduring birthright, not of some, but of all. As long as that pledge stands, we can never separate the quest for liberty from the fight for social and economic justice.

When I talk about these lofty ideals, I think about students who made it as well as those who didn't.

I think all the time about Herman. Herman was a middle school student of mine at Roxbury Prep. He was doing well in high school and had a bright future ahead of him. But one day, mistaken for someone else, he was shot and killed by a young man in his neighborhood not much older than he was. At that moment, the potential of both young men was lost to their families and the world.

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Chances are that – like Herman – the young man who killed him was once a bubbly 5-year-old, waving his hand in the air, eager to be called on by his teacher. Herman had opportunities and support his killer did not. I find myself thinking about what happened to all that promise. What could society and our schools have done to offer help and hope, so he didn't wind up on the street corner, gun in hand, anger and hatred in his heart?

But I also think about Titiciana.

Titiciana was a quiet, shy sixth-grader. But her math teacher noticed how well she was doing. She encouraged Titiciana to tutor her fellow students. School staff turned out to watch her play soccer and cheer her on. With the opportunities to lead and the recognition, Titiciana thrived. She decided to become a teacher, graduated from Boston College, and returned to Roxbury Prep to teach math to others like her. She is now dean of students there.

So, what is it going to take to create an America where opportunity is plentiful and prosperity is widely shared, where we lose fewer Hermans and prepare more Titicianas?

You already know the key is education. And you know that making this vision a reality

will take more hard work. But it is work we can do – together.



Today we have a choice to make. We can continue to argue amongst ourselves about our disagreements. Or we can work together in pursuit of larger goals. Now, I am not saying that we have to agree on every tactic or strategy. We won't. But I am saying that we can reject false dichotomies and disparaging rhetoric. We can stop questioning our allies' intentions and fight side by side for the belief that every student in America has the right to a great public education.

The passage of the new bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, marks a perfect time to set aside old debates and move forward together.

I think most of us can agree that the top down, one-size-fits-all approach of No Child Left Behind was a blunt tool, ill-suited to a nuanced task. ESSA, on the other hand, rightly empowers state and district leaders to develop strategies that address their unique challenges and needs. This exciting new flexibility could usher in a wave of innovation and improvement in education – and we should embrace it. But that doesn't mean

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every district should go it alone without guardrails for protecting students, guidelines for carrying it out, or the good ideas forged by peers through years of trial and toil.

Indeed, ESSA is fundamentally a civil rights law - an extension of the promise of educational equity made in the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. We, as leaders, can embrace the potential of this law and do the hard work to see that it is implemented in a way that delivers on that promise. Or, we as a field can fall back on what's easy – to cling to cynicism and take comfort in the status quo.

We also have a choice when it comes to high expectations for every student. I remember the pride I felt when, as a fifth grader at P.S. 276, my teacher Mr. Osterweil taught us how to read and understand Shakespeare. And I remember the bright spark in the eyes of a student I taught in Boston who wasn't always as motivated in school as he needed to be, but discovered his passion for social studies while writing a research paper on the Harlem Renaissance.

I also remember the pain and self-doubt I have heard from students I have met all over the country who went to college, only to

discover they weren't yet ready to do the work there and had to take remedial courses.



Nearly every state in the country has established college- and career-ready standards. But we must fight the inevitable efforts to water down those expectations and undercut our efforts to improve education systems when the work gets hard. More importantly, we have to invest in schools and teachers so they can help students meet those standards.

And we must have the courage to hold ourselves accountable for their success. Without accountability, standards are meaningless and equity is a charade.

Often, when folks hear the word "accountability" in education, they think of tests and consequences. But our choice isn't between "test-and-punish" policies based on redundant or poor-quality assessments, or "wish-and-hope," with no tests and little insight into how, or whether, our children are learning. Those of us who have stood up for reasonable assessment have a responsibility to make sure tests are better, fairer, and fewer, as President Obama has called for. But we can

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do that while providing teachers and families with valuable information about how students are doing. And we can do it without overburdening students or crowding out instruction.

So let's agree there's a balance to be struck. Let's encourage states to use only the highest quality assessments: assessments that help students demonstrate what they are learning through critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, rather than rote memorization. And then let's recognize that meaningful accountability is about so much more than tests. Together, let's help states develop accountability systems that are rich and varied – that include measures such as chronic absenteeism, access to and success in advanced courses, or new approaches to discipline that help students improve their behavior and their academic achievement.

As we choose to strike a better balance on accountability and testing, let's also resist a false choice between allowing public charter schools and supporting traditional public schools. Our primary concern shouldn't be the management structure of schools; it should be whether they serve all students well.

Some of the best schools in places like Newark, Los Angeles and the Rio Grande

Valley are public charter schools that are closing achievement gaps and preparing graduates who finish college. And as I saw last week in Boston, charters and district schools in many places are forming partnerships allowing them to learn from and be inspired by one another.



If we believe that public schools will always be the bedrock of American democracy and opportunity – and I do – we should welcome good public charter schools as laboratories for innovation that can benefit all of education. And supporters of public charter schools – myself included – must recognize the grave threat that ineffective ones pose to the entire sector. We must demand that charter authorizers set a high bar for granting a charter, rigorously monitor academic and operational performance, and close charter schools that fail their students. We must be equally rigorous in monitoring performance and working to turn around ineffective district schools. Supporting public charter schools and supporting district public schools means demanding quality for both.

Here's another false dichotomy: teachers are either exalted as the singular solution to all

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our education problems, or they are criticized for failing to solve them singlehandedly. We can make a better choice: we can recognize that teaching is an incredibly difficult job. Teachers make dozens of decisions every minute, hundreds during a school day and thousands every week. We can invest in teachers' preparation and development and welcome their expertise and leadership in issues that affect their students and classrooms each day.

Over the past two years, I've had countless conversations with teachers here in DC and across the country. To a person, they talk about becoming teachers to find the best in every child and help realize that potential. But I also hear their frustrations with the crush of paper work and the hours wasted in unhelpful in-service meetings or drive-by professional development sessions.

I hear about how they crave the insights of trusted colleagues who, having watched them work, can suggest a different way to ask a question or a project that they might have assigned instead of a worksheet. And I remember how hard it is to find time to hone your craft when you can't even carve out a minute to use the bathroom between classes.

Teachers need more resources and the higher pay they surely deserve, particularly those serving the highest need students. But we also need to make sure they have the space and opportunity - the clinically rich preparation, the collaboration time, the career ladders - to help them do what they joined the profession to do.



Quality. Accountability. Innovation. Effective teaching. These are among the most important issues we argue about in K-12 education policy today. But there are two more issues that we haven't always had the courage to address.

First, even successful strategies will fail without the funds to back them up — especially in the schools and neighborhoods where change is most needed. Money is never the only answer, but money does matter. It pays for higher salaries and for school counselors. Money builds science labs and repairs leaky roofs.

Yet, in districts all across the country, students who need the most still get the least. It's even worse when you look across district lines. Many children in Detroit or Chicago or

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Philadelphia can only dream of having the types of public schools that their peers a few miles away enjoy every day.

Federal dollars cannot begin to offset these inequalities. Yet, even a modest proposal to ensure that federal funds reach the students they are meant for has faced fierce opposition inside the beltway. But that's just the start of the conversation we need to be having about equitable access to resources.

It's not about one parent's child over another's, or one community's needs over another's. It's about choosing to invest in each other. Because we can't build fences high enough to divorce our own children's fate from that of children who live across town or across state lines. As a nation, we share one destiny.

That brings me to one more choice: between inclusion and segregation. This is among the most charged topics in education—and one we must confront. Our nation and our world are growing more diverse and interconnected. We need to recognize the multicultural makeup of our country as an asset, not a liability. This means we need schools that embrace diversity. Diverse schools are great preparation for all students. They help more

children succeed, help broaden students' perspectives, and help prepare them to

participate in a global workforce. And I am convinced that the growing conflicts in this country over race and religion and language would be profoundly reduced if our children were able to learn and play alongside classmates who were different from themselves and if they regularly encountered teachers and leaders of color in their schools.



Now, given the pitched battles of recent years' in K-12, the goals of increasing access to preschool and college completion might seem tame by comparison. But here, too, we have hard work to do and hard choices to make.

There is a growing bipartisan consensus toward increased access to preschool—as well there should be. But our choices don't end there, because access alone is not enough. The harder work before us is to ensure consistent quality for all students—because access to low-quality programs is no access at all.

We've seen similar momentum toward access to free community college and mitigating student debt to put a college degree or career credential within reach for every student. We must continue to invest in making college

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more accessible and affordable. And that starts by refusing to turn back the clock to a time when tens of billions of dollars intended to help students went instead to wasteful subsidies for big banks.

But we do students – and the nation – a disservice if we focus on access and affordability without also supporting completion.

Across the country, some schools – from the City University of New York's ASAP program to Georgia State to Arizona State University – are doing whatever it takes to help more students of every background enroll in college, stay on course, and earn their degrees by providing personalized, ongoing support and advising. We need to push more college, system, and state leaders to step up and adopt such evidence-based practices.

But there are also schools that deceive students, derail their dreams, and defraud families and taxpayers. There's no place for those schools in America.

We have cracked down on these predatory institutions, and that work, too, must continue. Because the most expensive degree

is still the one that you never complete; or the one not worth the paper it's written on.



None of the challenges I've mentioned today are easy, but here's the thing: solving them is not a mystery. The answers are out there. As Amanda Ripley recently wrote, in reflecting on the recent PISA results – and I quote – "The smartest countries tend to be those that have acted to make teaching more prestigious and selective; directed more resources to their neediest children; enrolled most children in high-quality preschools; helped schools establish cultures of constant improvement; and applied rigorous, consistent standards across all classrooms."

But we don't need to look to practices of international competitors for all the answers. We have them close to home as well. That is why this Administration has invested in I3 (the Investing in Innovation program) and in the Institute for Education Sciences to gather evidence of what is working – evidence that meets the rigorous standards taken for granted in medicine and science.

While we need to continue to encourage innovation and use what we learn to keep

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improving, we don't have to wait for some brilliant scientific or technological discovery. Instead we need to act on evidence and act boldly, urgently, and courageously.

And that means being united. From teachers in the classrooms to business leaders and elected officials to union leaders, from parents in Tulsa to community activists in Baltimore, we must all be a part of the solution. We may disagree about tactics and strategies, but, as advocates of public education, we cannot afford to disagree about the need to make choices that reflect the best interests of students, and to push ahead bravely.

Because for our children, it's literally a matter of life and death.

It was for me. It was for Herman, whose life was taken in the street by a young man who had been failed by his schools and society. And it is for Titiiana's students today as she now helps students in her neighborhood, the same way she was helped.

I am sure all of you who have worked in schools have stories similar to those of Herman and Titiiana. Let them inspire you to always make the choices that will help more young people know the success of a Titiiana and fewer suffer the fate of a Herman.

We can fight small battles tenaciously and default to easy solutions. Or, we can summon the will to work together on the big issues and be rewarded with an even greater, fairer, more prosperous nation to pass on to future generations.



When President Obama visited Selma and the Edmund Pettus Bridge to commemorate the 50th anniversary of that turning point in the fight for civil rights, he asked, "What greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?"

I don't know yet what I am going to do when I leave the Administration. But I can tell you that, whatever it is, I will choose to be the kind of patriot the President described.

I ask all of you to join me. 