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America Left Behind

Last month saw a major debate over the passing of the war funding bill. Buried within that debate was another, far reaching debate on domestic education funding to avert teacher layoffs that was eventually stripped from the bill. In light of this development, it is important that Americans remember that we became the world's indispensable nation, largely because of our early and almost certainly unique emphasis on mass public education.

And indeed, with State governments now considering devastating cuts in education funding as a means of reducing deficits, it is more important than ever that we focus on improving the quality and the outputs of education, as well as teacher performance and student scores on standardized tests.

It is inarguable that the quality and accessibility of public education has distinguished the United States from the rest of the world, and was directly responsible for our emergence as the global superpower.

But in recent years, the United States, for a variety of reasons, has abandoned its commitment to high quality educational achievement.

Once hailed as a bipartisan solution to address our nation's educational issues and raise student achievement, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has been an abject failure at addressing the fundamental problems facing our education system. Rapid gains in education outcomes stimulated by reforms in the 1990s have stalled since its passage, with math increases slowing and reading on the decline.

No Child Left Behind employed outcome-based theories & high expectations goal-setting -- setting annual test score targets tied to sanctions in the attempt to measure student achievement and achieve its goal of "100 percent proficiency" by 2014. By emphasizing test results and judging schools based on standardized test scores devoted solely to measuring basic skills, No Child Left Behind has systematically dumbed down our education system by encouraging teachers to find ways to produce the numbers, rather than maximize learning.

Put simply, the U.S. education system is in a state of crisis.

A 2007 study by the OECD found that U.S. 15-year-olds are below average when it comes to science and math literacy - scoring lower than 16 of the other 29 OECD nations on science literacy and lower than 23 of the other 29 OECD nations on math literacy.

Additionally, according to the most recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only nationally representative state-by-state assessment of achievement, scores for U.S. 12th graders in the sciences and the life sciences have declined from 1996 to 2005, while 8th graders have shown no improvement both on overall science and the life sciences component.

If the United States wants to retain its standing in the international community, we must abandon the failed carrots and sticks approach to education policy of No Child Left Behind, and act immediately and drastically to fundamentally reform and revitalize our education system.

We must replace the law's pass-fail school grading system with one that would measure individual students' academic growth and judge schools based not on test scores alone but also on indicators like graduation rates, learning rates, teacher performance, and school quality.

Moreover we must demand real results from our teachers and our schools. A study by McKinsey & Company of 25 education systems from across the world found that three things matter the most in providing a quality education: (1) getting the right people to become teachers; (2) developing them into effective instructors; and (3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

We must expand early childhood education, improve the teaching of science and math, and make sure every child can afford either college or vocational training.

We must improve the quality of teacher education programs and offer professional development opportunities for existing teachers to maximize teacher performance with deepening subject matter knowledge, and enhancement of teaching skills. Moreover, we should launch a national campaign to recruit top students to the teaching field.

Much has been written about the weakening of America's position in the world, and one of the most serious threats to the U.S. standing in the international community is frankly the stagnation and deterioration of our education system - particularly in the fields of science and technology.

And nowhere is this more evident than in the field of medical innovation.

Once the unchallenged global leader, the United States now finds itself struggling to keep pace in the field of medical innovation, as a result of its workforce that is fundamentally lacking the scientific talent pool needed to compete on a global scale, facilitate the development of new medical products and services, and promote the innovation necessary to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Medical innovation spurs job creation and economic growth through new medical products and services that cure diseases, increase life expectancy and produce health gains for society overall. Academic research plays an invaluable role in facilitating the development of new medical products. Indeed, a study conducted by the FDA in 2004 titled Innovation or Stagnation: Challenge and Opportunity on the Critical Path to New Medical Products, FDA, March 2004 found that 31 percent of new products and 11 percent of new processes in the biomedical field could not have been developed, without substantial delay, in the absence of academic research.

Failure to address and reform these serious deficiencies in our education system -- particularly in the fields of science and technology -- will fundamentally weaken the United States' economic strength and our political and cultural influence, making the further decline of American power and prestige virtually inevitable.