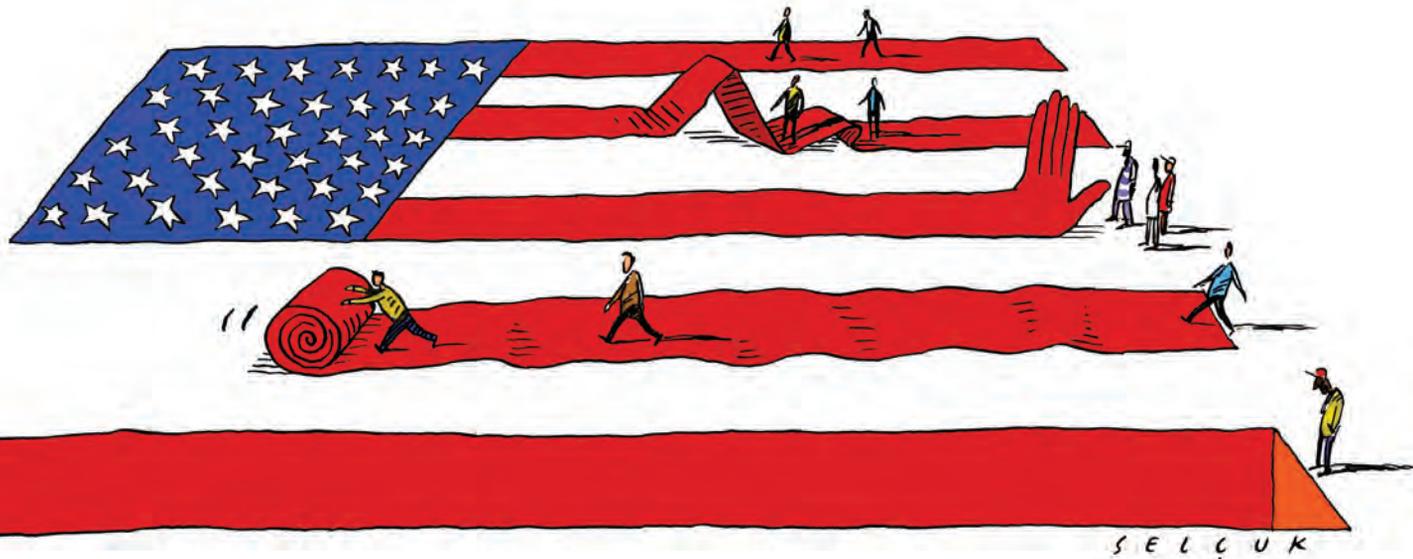


Preserving the American Dream

A Teacher-Turned-Congressman Starts a National Dialogue on Equity



BY MICHAEL HONDA

We are now more than a year into the economic recovery. While the worst of the Great Recession has passed, it has become clear that persistently high unemployment, coupled with budget woes that stretch from federal to local government, will be a reality for the foreseeable future. Knowing this, Congress, the Obama administration, and our constituents across the country are having a serious discussion about our nation's economy and what needs to be done to keep us competitive in the 21st century.

To make sure that education is where it belongs—at the heart of the conversation—we need to reframe what the president and others have called the civil rights issue of our time. Education is

Michael Honda is a U.S. congressman representing California's 15th Congressional District. He is a member of the House Appropriations Committee and the House Budget Committee, chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, cochair of the Democratic Caucus's New Media Working Group, House Democratic Senior Whip, and the original author of the act that created the Equity and Excellence Commission now housed in the U.S. Department of Education. For over 30 years, Honda was a teacher, principal, and school board member.

not only one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time, but it is also one of the greatest competitiveness issues, making it one of the greatest long-term economic issues, and by extension, one of the greatest national security issues we are faced with today.

The urgency of this eludes us, which is why it is up to each of us to do the pick-and-shovel work of building the political will to motivate our country to recognize this crisis, and act. Let me kick-start that conversation by sharing my vision, what I am doing to build that political will, and what I think we need to do in order to create real equity.

Currently, the United States is confronting two achievement gaps that threaten the future of our communities. The first achievement gap separates our communities by class and ethnicity. This attacks the very principle upon which our nation was founded: a promise of equal opportunity for all. Public education is the tool through which our society strives to deliver on this promise. When public education is inequitable, the foundation of our democratic society is compromised.

The second achievement gap is between the United States and other developed countries. Even though the United States spends more per pupil than any other developed nation, we compare poorly with other developed countries because our

achievement in reading, science, and math has remained stagnant over the last 30 years. Although our per-pupil spending is relatively high, it masks a serious funding gap outside the classroom. In overall social spending, the United States ranks dead last among developed nations. It is not surprising, then, that the United States has the fourth-highest rate of child poverty among developed nations.

All this adds up to threaten our competitiveness and our security because in the global economy, education is the enabler of opportunity and the enhancer of long-term financial stability and prosperity. The only way the United States will remain a world leader in the 21st century is if it ensures that the most competitive economy is built by the most highly skilled, innovative, and agile workforce.

The first achievement gap threatens the authenticity of the American dream by denying each child equal access to realize his or her fullest potential. But the second achievement gap represents an attack on the American dream itself because it threatens the viability of the middle class.

In order to address both of these gaps, we must distinguish

additional resources to address needs that originate outside the classroom. Equalize funding, and we would have only achieved parity of resources, not equity of opportunity.

Only by addressing the individual needs of each child, regardless of cost per pupil, can we attain equity. This will require precision in the way we finance public education and the way we calculate the level of resources we direct toward each child.

Inequity in education has deep historical roots. At its inception, the federal government lacked the capacity and the authority to take responsibility for public education. During the Revolutionary War, the 13 colonies ratified the Articles of Confederation, which severely limited the power of the central government. Because a unanimous vote was required to make amendments to the Articles, each state had, in essence, veto power over changes.

To ensure that the central government would remain weak, it was given no taxing power. Not only was the central government dependent on the states for funding, it was unable to force delinquent states to pay. After the Revolutionary War, when the need



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between equity and parity. In California, for example, while all schools may, in theory, be created equal, not all schools are treated equally. Consequently, any statewide funding cut disproportionately harms low-income communities and high-need students.

California's disparities are representative of funding disparities across the nation. The highest-spending American school district spends roughly 10 times more per pupil than the lowest-spending district. My congressional district in the Silicon Valley region, for example, contains one school district that spends nearly twice as much per student as an adjacent, similarly sized district. Unsurprisingly, the better-funded district has higher teacher salaries, lower student-teacher ratios, higher standardized test scores, and higher graduation rates than the neighboring district, which struggles with half the funding.

Federal funding tries to reduce these gaps and bridge these disparities by supplementing local budgets with additional federal dollars. The thinking here is that it will result in equal per-pupil spending across the system. This is not equity because it fails to take into account the specific needs of each child, including the need to address the achievement gap that develops before children enter school. Poor and minority students often require

for a stronger central government was apparent to many—but not all—state leaders, Rhode Island boycotted the Constitutional Convention and then refused to ratify the new Constitution, preferring the substantial freedom provided by the Articles. To placate states like Rhode Island, the Tenth Amendment ceded broad authority to the state governments.

Consequently, as regions of the country developed their own public education systems, disparities opened up. These disparities became more pronounced and localized as states used local property taxes to finance their own schools. It was not until the civil rights movement that the federal government became actively involved in financing education through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, in an effort to level the playing field. The Supreme Court, in its 1973 decision in *San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez*, effectively removed federal courts from school finance. To this day, federal dollars represent less than 10 percent of public education funding. State governments provide the bulk of the funding, so they are mostly immune to federal efforts to reform education policy.

The current crisis in state budgets has created a historic opportunity to change this paradigm. Most state governments,

mired in long-term fiscal trouble, are willing to accept requirements imposed by the federal government in order to receive desperately needed aid.

Paradigmatic change is already happening. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has altered the political landscape through competitive grant programs like Race to the Top, which provide state and local governments with funding if the recipient agrees to certain educational reforms. The impending reauthorization of ESEA has taken the process a step further: more than 40 states have agreed to the Common Core State Standards so they can qualify for future federal funding. The groundwork has been laid for an increased federal role in education. We need to build on these accomplishments to ensure that federal dollars can continue to be leveraged to produce local successes after the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding runs out.

We need to continue to redefine the federal role in public education. The implications for our democracy, and our role as

policies that will create equity for each child. The great thing about where we are now is that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. Innovation is critical, but it should not come at the expense of ignoring 50 years of research on what works.

We know the game changers. We not only know which children are likely to drop out of school, we know which schools most of them attend. We know when and where the achievement gap typically opens, and we have the tools to close it. We know that teachers are the most important school-based factor in a child's education, but we also know that for best results, students need more class time and a whole range of support services. We know the power of data, and we know how to train teachers to use it. We know where job growth is happening in our economy, and we know that a background in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and higher education are what our children need to achieve their fullest potential. Above all, we know that the single commodity children bring to school each



a world leader, require it. This leaves us with two interconnected questions: First, how do we reform the system of financing public education? Second, what policies should the federal government pursue in order to leverage this expanded role?

To solve the problem of reforming school finance and redefining the federal role in public education, I formed the National Commission on Education Equity and Excellence. The commission is housed in the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, and will bring together some of the foremost experts on education from across the political spectrum in order to conduct a national dialogue on school finance and equity that reaches the needs of each child. It is only by talking with teachers, parents, students, advocates, school board members, counselors, principals, and superintendents invested in each student's achievement that we can understand what is needed to make public education work in every community. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were well intentioned, but one of many key problems in both cases was Washington lawmakers' failure to hold the kind of dialogue needed to understand the incredible tools at the federal government's disposal to help states, districts, and schools succeed.

This time, we will not make the same mistake. Our national dialogue will not only devise new systems of finance, but new

day is time, and we must properly value it.

We know these things work, and we know how to accomplish them. We need to develop a new system of finance that empowers local community leaders, advocates, businesses, nonprofits, educators, parents, and students to join forces to devise a unique approach that works for their community.

Going forward, I see my work as twofold. First, I will continue to build the political support for the Equity Commission and to encourage this crucial dialogue so that we can organize to act. Second, I will propose and fight for legislation that addresses the critical game changers and uses the tools of the federal government to empower communities to educate their children.

We often hear that there is no silver bullet in education. This is correct. There is no single policy that will close the achievement gap for poor and minority students, but there is an array of policies that if implemented effectively will help us achieve our vision of equity for each child. The international achievement gap will also close as we employ all the tools in our toolbox to ensure that each and every child is successful.

We have a long struggle ahead of us, but right now we can finally say that the tide is starting to turn. For the first time, we are looking through a lens that makes all these complicated issues startlingly clear: what is best for each child? By answering this question, we begin the process of building a 21st-century economy that will work for all our children. □