

The People's Priorities

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As lawmakers turn from the November elections to the work of balancing the federal budget, it's necessary to reflect on the messages that voters conveyed. Americans expect our leaders to make our economy work for working families, invest in education and healthcare, rebuild the middle class, fight for good jobs and oppose efforts to strip Americans of their rights.

An important outcome of these elections, especially given the constant sparring in this area, is that when questions were on the ballot about public education, voters supported public education nearly every time.

Californians approved a measure—in these hard economic times—affirming that we have a responsibility to invest in our schools and that the wealthy can afford to pay their fair share. In Ohio, voters passed levies to invest in public schools after years of crippling cuts. Indianans ousted the state superintendent who had sought to run schools like businesses. Voters in Idaho said no to the fixation on standardized testing. And Floridians turned down an expansion of private school voucher programs as well as an initiative that would have resulted in drastic cuts to public education and other public services.

Whether concerning education or other issues, voters' wisdom—that neither deep cuts nor preferential tax policies for the super-wealthy will strengthen our economy or our country—should be the lens through which Congress views negotiations to avert the so-called fiscal cliff.

President Obama made clear in his first news conference after the election that his job is to help the middle class. He said he will fight for balance to ensure that the wealthy pay their fair share, that social safety nets are protected and that we care for the next generation.

That is where public education and teachers unions come in.

Mitt Romney made teachers unions an election issue, saying that he'd deprive them of political voice and that he'd keep the U.S. Department of Education only so he

could use it as a club to beat back teachers unions.

While critics put teachers unions in their crosshairs, the unions in effect serve as proxies for public education. If critics can discredit teachers and their unions, they can build the case for not improving, funding or valuing our public schools.

But facts are stubborn things. The highest-achieving states in the United States are also among the most highly organized. And what priorities does our union, the AFT, organize around? Promoting policies that have proven track records, ensuring adequate and equitable financing of public schools, and ending the harmful fixation on standardized testing.

Electing leaders who will work with us to advance sound policies is critically important to America's educators.

While probably never intended, the No Child Left Behind Act and the federal Race to the Top program have resulted in such corrosive misuse of testing that test fixation is now the status quo in American public education.

That must change to focus instead on what helps all kids succeed—and what can be scaled up and sustained. That's why the fiscal cliff debate and its impact on education and investment are so important. We need to target investments on approaches that work: early childhood education; high standards for both students and teachers, such as the Common Core State Standards, matched with high levels of support; shared accountability; wraparound services like healthcare to level the playing field for disadvantaged students; and rich curricula, including the arts and sciences, that light a spark in students.

Electing leaders who will work with us to advance such policies is critically important to America's educators, nurses and public employees, which is why, on my pre-election visits to 25 states and 59 cities, I saw so many of them volunteer their time to educate voters about the issues and high stakes in this election. I saw many amazing classrooms and schools. But I also met with teachers in Florida who said there is some form of testing in their schools 80 to 90 days each year. I talked to a wonderful teacher in Cleveland who had just retired because, with five classes of up to 50 students each day, she felt she could no longer create a classroom environment that inspires a joy of learning.

We must do right by our children, because when we strengthen access to an excellent education, we are all the better for it.



Weingarten with students and educators in Toledo, Ohio.

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