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HUFF
POST POLITICS

What is Right with Education Reform

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President Obama had an optimistic message for students in his "Back to School" speech last week telling a group of children in Philadelphia that nothing is beyond their reach with the right amount of passion and hard work. His challenging message to adults: our nation has an obligation to ensure that children are receiving the best possible education - the tool they need to achieve their dreams.

As 56 million children return to elementary and secondary schools this fall, we at the Business Coalition for Student Achievement, representing business leaders from every sector of the economy, are mindful of the sobering realities facing our education system, which is letting far too many of these children down. We agree with President Obama that ensuring the best possible education for our children will take "all of us working hand-in-hand"--but we cannot let the desire for consensus prevent us from taking a hard and honest look at our schools and policies and making difficult but necessary changes.

As employers, we believe that dramatically improving our K-12 education system is critical to providing a strong foundation for our nation's competitiveness, promoting innovation and economic growth, and creating the well-paying jobs of tomorrow. At a time when resources are limited, it's important to focus on the things that will have the greatest impact and bolster existing efforts that are moving us in the right direction. In that spirit, we urge the Obama Administration and the Congress to implement what we believe are the core components of a successful federal education reform strategy.

First, update and strengthen the key elements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including rigorous, high-quality standards and assessments, increased accountability for performance at all levels of the school system, effective teachers and administrators, and expanded options for parents and children. Second, continue funding for competitive programs that incentivize innovating thinking at the state and local level. The \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund, which rewards states that have shown success in raising student achievement and have the best plans to accelerate their reforms in the future, is already spurring significant reforms, prodding 11 states to tie teacher pay to student performance, nearly 40 to adopt rigorous reading and math standards and another dozen to vow to fix failing schools. These states will offer models for others to follow and will spread the best reform ideas across their states and across the country. Likewise, the Teacher Incentive Fund is generating new models of teacher and principal compensation reform that can help attract and retain the strongest educators and school leaders.

Third, increase funding for high-quality charter schools, holding them accountable for improved academic achievement just as we do with traditional public schools, and for programs that boost student achievement in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Fourth, ensure that education reform is the top priority when federal taxpayer dollars support state and local education efforts. We cannot afford to use limited resources to prop up the educational status quo.

As employers, we understand the important role that the U.S. business community must play in ensuring that the American education system prepares our youth to meet the challenges of higher education and the workplace. In fact, there is perhaps no greater job the U.S. business community can undertake. We stand ready to work in partnership with the Obama Administration, Congress and all stakeholders on the essential task of raising student achievement in the U.S.

However, education reform isn't - and shouldn't - just be a concern for CEOs and Washington insiders. True reform will come from rigor, not rhetoric. Parents, teachers, state legislators and communities must work together to take a more active role in education on the state and local levels. They must be even more diligent in supporting their local schools. They must demand classroom innovation and accountability systems that measure and reward results, and that ensure change when improvements are needed. Ultimately no government reform will be successful without all of us as citizens and parents holding ourselves, and our children's schools, accountable. Together we can make a difference for students and teachers, and ultimately, our nation's future.