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Mitt Romney Delivers Remarks On Education: "A Chance For Every Child"

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Location

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Mitt Romney today delivered remarks on education at The Latino Coalition's Annual Economic Summit in Washington, D.C. The following remarks were prepared for delivery:

Thanks to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for hosting us. This year the Chamber marks 100 years of Standing Up for American Enterprise. Few organizations have fought longer or harder for the principles of economic freedom. And these days, your voice is more important than ever.

I am grateful to the Latino Coalition for the invitation to be part of your Annual Economic Summit. In recent days we've heard a lot about business from the President and if you're feeling like you deserve protection under the Endangered Species Act, I can't blame you.

This is a time when everybody in this administration should be doing everything in their power to support you. If every one of our small businesses added just two employees, Americans could pay more mortgages and buy more groceries and fill their gas tanks.

Instead, sadly, President Obama has decided to attack success. It's no wonder so many of his own supporters are calling on him to stop this war on job creators. Make no mistake, when I am President, you won't wake up every day and wonder if the President is on your side.

Starting on Day One, I'll be there to help you make it. And if you're successful beyond your wildest dreams, I'll be the first to celebrate your success because I know your prosperity means greater opportunity – for you, for your families, for your employees, and for your communities. And that's what the American Dream is all about.

During my lifetime, I've seen a few of my own dreams come true. I've run and started business, helped guide the Olympics, and led a great state. I learned early on that the only way to succeed in tough situations is to bring people together for a common purpose. That's how you achieve greatness and accomplish your goals.

Dividing people and pitting one side against another produces nothing but failure and mediocrity. Unfortunately, we've seen too much of that from this administration. That's part of why we're facing the slowest economic recovery since the Great Depression. And it's why this President and his party have failed to address the most serious problems facing our country.

When the President took office, he faced a jobs crisis. It's barely improved. He faced a spending crisis. It's only gotten worse. And he faced an education crisis.

I'd love to stand here today and join you in celebrating the end of our education crisis. Wouldn't it be great if we could look back on the last four years with confidence that the crisis had been confronted and we'd turned the corner toward a brighter future?

But sadly, that hasn't happened. And the tragedy is not just a matter of test scores and international rankings. It's the frustration of a sixth grader who wants to learn more, but is stuck in a class that's moving too slowly. It's the embarrassment of a 10th grader who knows he can't read the books he's assigned. It's the shame of a 12th grader who's supposed to be ready to graduate, but hasn't mastered the skills he or she needs to succeed in life.

In this country, we believe every child has something to contribute. No matter what circumstances they were born into, every child has a dream about where they can go or what they can become. Whether that dream is to invent something, start something, build something, or create something, it all starts with the basic skills and confidence that only a good education can provide.

Yet, today, too many dreams are never realized because our education system is failing.

More than 150 years ago, our nation pioneered public education. We've now fallen way behind.

Among developed countries, the United States comes in 14th of 34 in reading, 17th of 34 in science, and an abysmal 25th out of 34 in math.

Our public education system is supposed to ensure that every child gets a strong start in life. Yet, one in four students fails to attain a high school degree. And in our major cities, half of our kids won't graduate. Imagine that.

Imagine if your enterprise had a 25% to 50% failure rate in meeting its primary goal. You would consider that a crisis. You would make changes, and fast. Because if you didn't, you'd go out of business.

But America's public education establishment shows no sense of urgency. Instead, there is a fierce determination to keep things the way they are.

Here we are in the most prosperous nation, but millions of kids are getting a third-world education. And, America's minority children suffer the most. This is the civil-rights issue of our era. It's the great challenge of our time.

Last week, I spoke about the prairie fire of debt that is spreading across our country. Today, I want to talk about our crisis in education. With all of our economic troubles, there's a temptation to put off the task of fixing our nations' schools for another time. But the jobs and housing failures of these past few years only make that task more important.

Let's not kid ourselves – we are in the midst of a National Education Emergency. The only reason we don't hear more about it is because our economic troubles have taken our national attention away from the classroom. But if unemployment was where it should be and home values were going up, there is no question that the crisis in American education would be the great cause of this campaign.

Of course, the jobs and housing failures of these past few years only make the need for educational improvement all the more critical. So I'll be blunt: I don't like the direction of American education, and as President, I will do everything in my power to reverse this decline.

Much as you have in your own business careers, I've found that you can't expect dramatically different results unless you are open to dramatic change. As president, I will pursue bold policy changes that will restore the promise of our nation's education system.

First, I will expand parental choice in an unprecedented way. Too many of our kids are trapped in schools that are failing or simply don't meet their needs. And for too long, we've merely talked about the virtues of school choice.

As President, I will give the parents of every low-income and special needs student the chance to choose where their child goes to school. For the first time in history, federal education funds will be linked to a student, so that parents can send their child to any public or charter school, or to a private school, where permitted. And I will make that choice meaningful by ensuring there are sufficient options to exercise it.

To receive the full complement of federal education dollars, states must provide students with ample school choice. In addition, digital learning options must not be prohibited. And charter schools or similar education choices must be scaled up to meet student demand.

Instead of eliminating the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program as President Obama has proposed, I will expand it to offer more students a chance to attend a better school. It will be a model for parental choice programs across the nation.

Parental choice will hold schools responsible for results, but parents can only exercise that choice effectively if they have good information. No Child Left Behind helped our nation take a giant step forward in bridging this information gap. But the law is not without its weaknesses. As president, I will break the political logjam that has prevented successful reform of the law. I will reduce federal micromanagement while redoubling efforts to ensure that schools are held responsible for results.

For example, parents shouldn't have to navigate a cryptic evaluation system to figure out how their kids' schools are performing. States must provide a simple-to-read and widely available public report card that evaluates each school. These report cards will provide accurate and easy-to-understand information about student and school performance. States will continue to design their own standards and tests, but the report cards will provide information that parents can use to make informed choices.

We will take bold steps to ensure our system welcomes and rewards the best teachers. As president, I will make it my goal to ensure that every classroom has a quality teacher.

There are currently 82 programs in ten agencies that spend \$4 billion on teacher quality. As president, I will consolidate these programs, and block grant them to states that adopt innovative policies. For example, states will be rewarded if they regularly evaluate teachers for their effectiveness and compensate the best teachers for their success. Teaching is a highly valued profession that must attract and retain the best and brightest.

Dramatically expanding parental choice, making schools responsible for results by giving parents access to clear and instructive information, and attracting and rewarding our best teachers--these changes can help ensure that every parent has a choice and every child has a chance.

Finally, since we live in a twenty-first century economy that increasingly demands a college education, efforts at improvement can't stop at high school's end. Students must have access to a wide variety of options that will give them the skills they need for successful careers. We must stop fueling skyrocketing tuition prices that put higher education out of reach for some and leave others with crushing debt.

These are bold initiatives that will produce better outcomes for our parents and teachers and students. But accomplishing real change won't be easy. Efforts to truly reform our schools always meet strong resistance from entrenched interests.

The teachers unions are the clearest example of a group that has lost its way. Whenever anyone dares to offer a new idea, the unions protest the loudest.

Their attitude was memorably expressed by a long-time president of the American Federation of Teachers: He said, quote, "When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of children."

The teachers unions don't fight for our children. That's our job. And our job keeps getting harder because the unions wield outsized influence in elections and campaigns.

Annually, many teachers are forced to pay almost \$1,000 in union dues. The two major teachers unions take in \$600 million each year. That's more revenue than both of the political parties combined.

In 2008, the National Education Association spent more money on campaigns than any other organization in the country. And 90% of those funds went to Democrats.

Education is one issue where it should be easy to find common purpose and common solutions. And I believe the President must be troubled by the lack of progress since he took office. Most likely, he would have liked to do more. But the teachers unions are one of the Democrats' biggest donors – and one of the President's biggest campaign supporters. So, President Obama has been unable to stand up to union bosses – and unwilling to stand up for kids.

The most recent example is the Opportunity Scholarship program. Since 2004, it's allowed thousands of children in the District of Columbia to escape one of the worst school systems in the nation and get a world-class education. Armed with scholarships of up to \$7,500, students enrolled in private schools. 99% of them were African American or Hispanic.

After three months, students could already read at levels 19 months ahead of their public-school peers. And parents were happy; for every spot in the program, there were 4 applications.

Then, Senator Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, inserted a provision to end the program. The White House offered no resistance. In fact, the President has proposed ending all funding for Opportunity Scholarships. It must have gone against his better instincts, but the unions wanted it so he went along.

In the Opportunity Scholarships, the Democrats finally found the one federal program they are willing to cut. Why? Because success anywhere in our public schools is a rebuke to failure everywhere else. That's why the unions oppose even the most common sense improvements.

In Detroit, students in the city's failing public schools were offered a lifeline by a philanthropist who offered \$200 million to create 15 charter schools. The teachers union made the state legislature turn that gift down.

In Connecticut, parents groups tried to pass "parent trigger" legislation so they could take over and transform failing schools. A national teachers union moved fast to stop that.

Now some union leaders will tell you that their objections are misunderstood. They'll argue the issues are complicated. But really it's simple – and it comes down to this: When your cause in life is preventing parents from having a meaningful choice or children from having a real chance, then you are on the wrong side. You might even be in the wrong vocation, because good teachers put the interests of children first.

The same is true of a good president. In his speeches, President Obama likes to tell us "we can't wait." If only he would say that and mean it about education reform – because millions are waiting for change, and so many are missing their chance.

The President can't have it both ways: He can't talk up reform, while indulging the groups that block it. He can't be the voice of disadvantaged public-school kids, and the protector of special interests.

President Obama has made his choice, and I have made mine: As president, I will be a champion of real education reform in America, and I won't let any special interest get in the way.

We have to stop putting campaign cash ahead of our kids.

This is a battle we can and must win. And while a lot needs fixing, we're getting some of the most important things right.

We have good teachers, like the ones who are leading New York City's Democracy Prep. Because of them, kids from the city's poorest community are outperforming children from the wealthiest. Last summer, these teachers took over the worst elementary school in Harlem rather than let it shut down. Democracy Prep is a testament to good people who refuse to give up on our kids or leave our cities without a fight.

And leadership makes a huge difference. When Jeb Bush became governor of Florida, reading scores of Hispanic students in that state's school system were dismal. He brought focused innovation and passionate leadership. Today those scores have risen dramatically.

But too often, new ideas, good teachers, and dedicated parents don't find a welcoming partner and true champion in elected officials like Governor Bush. Instead, they are met with resistance and resentment from the establishment.

I know what it is like to be a Governor fighting to do things differently. You need every bit of help you can get. As President, I'll stand shoulder to shoulder with these reformers and innovators.

When I became Governor, we were in the midst of instituting tough, bi-partisan education reforms. They included the requirement that every student pass a test to graduate from high school. The test came under attack from the unions. But we stood our ground.

We also offered our best students a four-year, tuition-free scholarship to the state college of their choice. I called it the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship, after two Massachusetts citizens who understood the importance of education to our nation.

Every year I'd ask a school principal to invite the students who scored in the top 25% on the exam to a special assembly. After some words about hard work, I'd ask them to reach under their chair and remove an envelope that had been taped there. And I'd watch as each of them would open the enclosed letter.

Every year, I'd stand in front of the room and the same scene would unfold:

At first, you could hear a pin drop. Then each student's eyes would get big and proud smiles would creep across their faces as they found out how well they had done on the exam. And then they would read the part of the letter where they learned they'd earned an Adams Scholarship. The smiles turned into cheers – and the sound was deafening.

I got more hugs on Adams Scholarship day than I did at Christmas. Kids would bring me their cell phones so I could tell their parents the exciting news. And parents – more than once – told me that they had been worried they would not be able to afford college and that the scholarship would make a difference.

Here in America, every child deserves a chance. It shouldn't be reserved for the fortunate few.

If America is going to continue to lead the world in how much we build, create, and invent, then we must transform how we teach, train, and educate. We already have good teachers, engaged parents, and big ideas. What we need now is strong leadership and the political will.

A choice for every parent means a chance for every child. That can be more than our hope – it can be our future. It can begin this year, in the choice you make, so I ask for your help, your support, and your vote on the sixth of November.

Thank you all, and God bless America.

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