The 2008 presidential election stands as a “change” election. The public’s anxiety over the challenges globalization poses to the future of the American Dream is driving a desire for the country to change direction. The American people understand that what will give the nation a competitive advantage in a global marketplace are the skills, creativity, and drive of its citizens.

Today, America’s public education system gets a “gentleman’s C.” Our public school students consistently rank average or below average in international comparisons of student achievement. A study by University of Pennsylvania researchers, which has been used to counter arguments that America’s public education system is not working as well as it should, found that the U.S. was generally a bit above average when compared with other industrialized nations and in the middle in the important subjects of math and science. Imagine the public outcry if a study concluded that the U.S. was in the middle of the pack or just slightly better than average when it came to our per-capita income or our nation’s military strength?

Pay our teachers more, expand our preschool programs, and instill a culture of high expectations

BY CHRISTOPHER S. LEHANE
Given the enormous changes taking place in the world, the current education achievement gap between low-income and affluent students, and the logical nexus between a nation’s economic strength and the quality of its public education system, it is incumbent on our country to put in place a national education strategy. Leaders in the Democratic Party have the opportunity to step up to the plate and provide leadership and public policy solutions.

First, a national education plan would animate the Democratic Party’s ideological commitment to providing equal opportunity for all. It is imperative that minority children receive the same level of educational opportunity as white children. If we want high-tech businesses and high-quality jobs being developed in the United States rather than in China, all of our children need to be prepared to earn a good living. We simply cannot afford to allow segments of our population to lack the skills needed to compete in the global economy.

Second, whenever the U.S. has moved from one era to another, the public has historically looked to the government to take the lead in addressing the attendant challenges. This pattern holds true today, whether the challenge is global warming, terrorism, immigration, disaster relief, or education. For the Democrats, a party that philosophically believes that government should and can play an important role in providing for both the national and economic security of our country, the public’s desire for government action is an enormous opportunity to demonstrate leadership (see Figure 1).

Third, a national education strategy offers Democrats the chance to best the Republican Party politically by standing as protector of the American Dream. Communicating a clear economic philosophy will help the party beat the standard Republican play that raises the specter of higher taxes in every discussion about investing in the country’s future. Linking a high-performing public education system with a strong economy and our country’s national security at a time when voters, especially middle-class voters, are connecting these dots themselves will give Democrats a winning public policy agenda.

So far in the 2008 presidential campaign, public education has not been a breakthrough issue for the Democratic candidates. To be sure, a number of the candidates have strong public education credentials, and virtually all consistently touch on the subject. But none of the Democratic presidential candidates have discussed thematically the central role public education will play in addressing the challenges of globalization.

Three principles should guide the candidates as they seize the opportunity to get out in front on the critical issue of transforming our public schools to be the best in the world.

A Democratic Education Agenda

**Principle I: Support Teachers**

Everyone knows what a tremendous impact a great teacher can make on a child’s life. Studies consistently show that the single most important factor in improving student achievement is a quality teacher. If America is going to improve its schools, we must do a better job of attracting our most passionate and high-achieving individuals to the classroom. With the baby-boom generation retiring in large numbers, we are facing a historic shortage of teachers. In California, the state teaching shortage could be as high as 100,000 within 10 years.

The U.S. also needs to make it easier for those who want to become teachers to join the ranks, including creating an alternative credentialing route that recognizes nonteaching professional backgrounds and supports high achievers looking to transition into the classroom. There are many nonprofit programs making a difference that could be expanded. Teach For America, an organization that recruits high-achieving college students to make a two-year commitment to teaching in the inner city, was ranked by college graduates as one of the 10 most wanted employers. In addition, many professionals have the passion to teach, and they will pursue teaching if we make it a more
viable option. We might be talking about an attorney who has practiced law for 15 years and wants to give something back, or an engineer who has 20 years of military service. It is critical to acknowledge the value in those backgrounds and create a streamlined credentialing process.

So far in the 2008 presidential campaign, public education has not been a breakthrough issue for the Democratic candidates. None have discussed the central role public education will play in addressing the challenges of globalization.

Finally, plain and simple, we need to pay our teachers more, especially those teaching in underserved communities and high-need subject areas. In response to the teaching shortage, school officials in Los Angeles have offered teachers a $5,000 stipend to work in low-performing schools, and New York City officials provide $5,000 for a down payment on a house to educators teaching in mathematics, science, and special education.

Principle II: Think Pre-K–16
Our children begin their required schooling too late and graduate too early. If we are serious about educating our children, we need to start them at the same age they begin playing organized sports—the pre-K years—and see them through college, the level of education needed to succeed in an Information Age economy.

Pre-K programs provide a critical education foundation. Studies have demonstrated that children with access to high-quality pre-K education graduate from high school in higher rates, perform better on standardized tests, are less likely to go to jail, and are more likely to have greater employment and wage-earning opportunities. Economist Robert Lynch recently released a study, *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation*, which found that providing pre-K education produces large, measurable economic benefits for children and the nation. The Lynch study estimated that the total annual budgetary, crime, and earnings benefits from a universal program in place nationwide would be $779 billion by 2050.

We also need to extend public education through four years of college. Virtually all the research shows that a college degree affords better pay, more options, and a brighter economic future. According to the 2006 Graduation Project report, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a college grad earned 50 percent more than someone with only a high school degree in 1980. By 2004, a college graduate earned nearly double.

Maine, a state with a low college attendance rate that is losing its blue-collar jobs as the forestry, fishing, boat-building, and paper-making industries contract, is considering requiring students to apply to college or postsecondary vocational schooling before receiving a high school diploma. The thinking is that making applying to higher education mandatory will encourage college attendance, which in turn will help create a generation of children who will be able to compete as well as attract the jobs of the future to the state. Other states, such as Georgia, have made college accessible by providing free tuition for high school graduates who are able to maintain a specified grade-point average. It is time to take what is going on in these states to the next level by transforming our K–12 system of free public schools to pre-K through 16 nationwide.

Principle III: Instill a Public School Culture of High Expectations
One of the challenges facing schools, especially those serving disadvantaged populations, is the expectations ceiling. Simply put, it is too widely accepted that some students cannot succeed. Where low expectations persist, schools face safety and discipline challenges and practice social promotion, moving kids along regardless of whether they have the skill set needed to succeed in the next grade.

America’s public schools must be committed to shattering the “expectations ceiling.” It was thought early on that public charter schools would serve as “laboratories of education,” where independence, flexibility, and innovation would produce high-quality learning environments that could be replicated across the country. While charter school performance has been mixed to date, a growing number of brand-name charter schools are having tremendous success in communities where high student achievement was thought impossible. Amistad Academy in New Haven, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academy in Houston, Texas, and Green Dot Ánimo
High School, located in the barrio in East Los Angeles, are well-documented examples. These schools hold students accountable for achievement; extend the school day, week, and year; and give principals the autonomy to hire the most skilled teachers. The students at Amistad Academy, who are 97 percent minority and 84 percent poor, are told again and again that they will go to college. Amistad’s philosophy is that low-income, minority children can succeed as well as white middle-class students if only they are exposed to quality teachers, a culture of high expectations, and an extended school day. In recent years, 86 percent of the school’s 8th graders passed the state’s writing test, above the statewide average of 62 percent and better than the public schools of wealthy Greenwich. These schools are beginning to replicate nationwide. In just over a decade, KIPP has grown from 2 schools to 57 schools in 17 states.

The success of these brand-name schools is having an impact on the traditional public school system. In Massachusetts, a pilot extended-day program in which 10 elementary schools have eight-hour days has led to higher attendance and achievement. Governor Deval Patrick has allocated $6.5 million to expand the program to more Massachusetts schools. We need to support laws and policies that allow proven education models, in both charters and traditional schools, to flourish in our education landscape.

During the recent immigration reform debate, high-tech companies, trade groups representing high-tech companies, and elected officials contended that it was in America’s economic interest to allow skilled workers to enter the country on H-1B visas. They argued that these workers are essential to the ability of America’s high-tech companies to compete against their foreign-based competitors. The fact that the very high-tech companies that represent America’s economic future have to look abroad for workers with the needed skills is a chilling sign that we have to get our act together when it comes to public education. America’s future depends on hitting the books and turning a grade C public education system to an A+ public education system. And to make this grade, we will need a president who is capable of being both a commander in chief and superintendent in chief.

Christopher S. Lehane, a California-based Democratic political consultant, served as press secretary for former vice president Al Gore and was special assistant counsel to President Bill Clinton.
Interested in Education?

Wonder what's happening in our schools?

Education Next gives you:

- Cutting-edge research by famous scholars
- Provocative features
- Honest exchanges of opinion
- Great graphics and engaging text

To subscribe visit www.educationnext.org or call 1-800-935-2882