

## **Memo to Obama: Fixing our schools can't wait**

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**BY EDWARD B. RUST JR.**

It has been generations since an American president-elect inherited so many daunting problems -- urgent issues having to do with our nation's security and overall well-being.

Pressing matters concerning the economy, energy, and wars in distant lands will compete for our new president's attention. But, as a consequence, he must not allow an issue he himself describes as "among our most urgent" to be forgotten or delayed. That's because it, too, has everything to do with America's well-being.

It is, in President-elect Barack Obama's own words: "Preparing our children to compete in a global economy."

As other issues elbow their way to the front of the line, it will be tempting to go with the status quo in our schools, to allow education matters to be shuffled back into the "when we can get to them" area. That's because there are no overnight solutions. Yet the future of young Americans and the security of our nation are at risk.

Only a few days ago in campaign commercials, candidate Obama was asking whether our country will be better off four years from now. A year ago in a New Hampshire speech about school reform, he identified several matters that can be tackled immediately so our schools and, even more importantly, our children can in fact be better off four years from now.

No program and no policy, he said, can substitute for parents who are involved in their child's learning from day one. But he also recognized that today more of our children are spending more time in front of a television or video game than doing homework. And young children are spending more time with caretakers who aren't their parents. This means we need more emphasis on early childhood education.

He discussed the need to recruit the right kind of people into teaching, to properly prepare them, to reward the good teachers but replace those who missed their

calling. He said teachers are the single most important factor in determining whether our children succeed in school.

He noted our students' general lack of achievement in science and math. (A recent study of students in 30 countries ranked U.S. students 21st in science and 25th in math.) If we can make science and math education a national priority, we'll improve our economy, security and social structure.

He discussed our nation's alarming dropout rate -- about 7,000 students drop out of high school every school day (nearly 300 here in Illinois). We must help our most at-risk kids stay in school and succeed in their studies.

And he acknowledged that while "No Child Left Behind" needs improvement, it has the right goals. We do need more accountability -- not less. And we need excellent teachers educating all children, including those from difficult circumstances, so they can meet high standards.

In that speech to a Manchester, N.H., audience a year ago, candidate Obama called education "the currency of the Information Age" and said "it's no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success -- it's a prerequisite."

Important issues will compete for our nation's resources and our new president's leadership focus. But unless we step up the pace to improve our schools now, we've reduced the chances of building better lives for the generations of Americans to come.

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