

Comments delivered by Edward B. Rust Jr., Chairman and CEO of State Farm, Nov. 6, 2008 in accepting award at Voices for Illinois Children's 2008 Kids Count Awards Dinner, Four Season Hotel, Chicago, Ill.

Two days ago, the citizens of this nation elected a new President (and Chicago partied).

There has never been a presidential election where everyone agreed with the outcome. That would include this one. But I think it's true (and it may be especially true this year) that we're all glad the campaign season is over and that we, as a nation, can now look forward to the renewal that arrives with each new administration.

President-elect Obama comes to office at a time when our country faces substantial challenges—challenges having to do with our overall economic well-being, our national security and our very future.

There are many competing priorities. Priorities in terms of leadership focus and financial resources—whether we're talking about the economy, about energy and the environment, about healthcare, or about conflicts in distant lands.

But if I had the opportunity to visit with our President-elect tonight, I would tell him this:

These are pressing troubles. These are urgent problems. But please do not allow those issues requiring immediate attention to detour us from addressing our most fundamental need: the education of our children.

As you, Mr. President-elect, told us in your last debate: “We have to get our education system right.” And that this “probably has more to do with our economic future than anything.”

The education issues are well-known. You've talked about them.

You clearly care a great deal about one that's been at the top of the Voices of Illinois Children agenda for two decades now: investing in early childhood education.

A growing number of our young children are spending more time with caretakers who aren't their parents. That needs to be a time of cultivating curiosity and learning.

You've also discussed the need to recruit the right kind of people into teaching, to properly prepare them, to retain and appropriately reward the good teachers while replacing those who missed their calling. Mr. President-elect, you have also recognized teachers as the single most important factor in determining whether our children succeed in school. We need every teacher to be an effective educator and committed to professional development.

You've promised to make science and math education a national priority. Right here in your home state of Illinois, we have a non-stop shortage of math and science teachers at the same time we lack qualified workers in the fastest-growing occupations which happen to require a basic knowledge of science and math.

You've discussed the dropout rate. Again, right here in Illinois, if today was like most school days, close to 300 kids dropped out of high school. And 300 more will drop out tomorrow. We need to help our most at-risk kids stay in school and succeed in school.

You've acknowledged that the No Child Left Behind Act has the right goals. In your own words: educating every child with an excellent teacher; closing the achievement gap; more accountability; ensuring that all children can meet higher standards. "No Child" has brought about some advances. But it needs to be improved.

And finally, you've talked about the need to get parents and communities more involved in our schools. You, Mr. President-elect, have the demonstrated ability to inspire people, to encourage them, to help every parent, every citizen, every community understand that a well-rounded education for all of our children is a responsibility we all must bear.

I remember you saying that as President, you will be honest about the challenges we face. And then I remember what historian and author David McCullough once said about President Kennedy: "That he didn't say I'm going to make it easier for you. He said it's going to be harder. And he wasn't pandering to the less noble side of human nature. He was calling on us to give our best."

I would close my conversation with the President-elect by saying that I can't speak for all Americans or even other business people. But I can say what I believe to be true.

I believe American business is prepared to make the needed investments in our schools if we can be sure that when students emerge from those schools, they'll have the knowledge and skills necessary to be productive workers and managers in our factories and offices, and good citizens.

And I believe all Americans are ready to do what's right for our children and for our country—to give our best.

As he addresses the multitude of serious issues facing our nation and our world, our new president will need courage and strength. And he will need to help our nation have the foresight to address the one issue that means the most to our collective future: making sure all our children can compete in a global economy.

Tonight, as I gratefully accept this award on behalf of my colleagues at State Farm, I applaud everyone connected with Voices for Illinois Children for what you're

doing. Your efforts are not about elections, but are about making a positive difference in the lives of our youngest citizens. Still, there's more to be done.

So tonight I challenge all of us to pledge our support, to give our very best toward a common goal of building better lives for the generations to come.

#