



Rescue the future by fixing our schools

By Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) and Eric Hanushek - 06/05/13 05:36 PM ET

Thirty years ago last month, President Ronald Reagan's Education Department released *A Nation at Risk*. The report said unequivocally that U.S. education was in crisis. What does it say that in 2013, the same imminent threats to our nation's global leadership and the attainability of the American dream for all students still exist?

Our schools are neither excellent nor equitable, but we allow this to continue with just lip service about the problem. If we allow another three decades of slow movement on dealing with these issues, it will have profound implications for America's economic and social well-being. These problems cannot be swept under the rug if America and our children are to realize their full potential.

The urgency of the situation led Reps. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) and Chakah Fattah (D-Pa.) to join together in calling for a fresh look at the issue from a federal perspective. The resulting report, *For Each and Every Child*, was released recently by the Department of Education's Equity and Excellence Commission.

The first finding of the commission is perhaps the most important: This is not a partisan issue. In these days of divisive political turmoil in Washington, D.C., and in the 50 state capitals, the need to educate our young — all of our young — is indisputable.

We have twin problems: achievement that is too low and achievement gaps that are too large. For these, the commission has twin solutions: ensuring that the country makes sufficient investments in our future and that it does it in an equitable and efficient manner.

The performance issue at one level is simple. U.S. students are not achieving at internationally competitive levels, and large portions of our population are being left even further behind.

The costs are enormous. If overall achievement could be raised to that of Canada, historical patterns of the

influence of human capital on GDP imply an average of 20 percent higher salaries for all workers over the next 80 years. Moreover, the existing achievement gaps lead to the same kind of depressing effect on our economy. If the achievement of black and Hispanic students could be brought up to the level of white students, history implies economic gains cumulated over the next 80 years of three times our current GDP.

These gains could easily solve all of our current fiscal problems, to say nothing of moving toward a much more equitable society. All the current debates really assume that the economy remains as it is. They ignore the solution that comes with policies that lead to greater growth.

At another level, the issue is not so simple. We have talked about these problems since the last federal commission considered school finance in the Nixon administration and since the Nation at Risk report was issued during the Reagan administration. But the results have been uniformly disappointing.

The commission provides many details, but they are largely subsumed under a single overarching idea: We have to provide sufficient support for our schools and ensure that it is efficiently used. Too much of the current discussion tries to argue one side or the other, more money or more efficiency. It is clear that we must move toward a system that ensures both.

The actual work must be done largely by the states, but in order to truly accomplish our mission, the federal government must be more actively involved. The federal government can encourage and support state efforts to design funding systems that have the proper incentives for performance.

The federal government can provide research and evaluation not only on programs and policies but also on the costs of efficiently providing the quality education that is necessary. The federal government must use all of its tools: funding, oversight, convening and mandating to obtain the true gains in achievement that our economy demands.

We have spent decades exhorting schools to do better. It is now time to move on to making this a reality. Again, this is a national issue, not a partisan issue. Hoping that somebody else will do a better job is not a solution, and the federal government and the states must finally consider the kinds of changes that would really matter for our students.

By ensuring that each and every child has access to a meaningful educational opportunity, we ensure America's position as global innovator and leader.

Honda represents California's 17th congressional district, which includes Silicon Valley. He is a former educator and the author of legislation that created the Equity and Excellence Commission. Hanushek is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and a member of the Equity and Excellence Commission.

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