

Our children deserve better

Written by Benjamin Todd Jealous, NNPA Guest Columnist
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Every generation believes their children deserve to be better off than they were. This belief inspired the first slave rebellion in 1663, when a new law dictated that children of African slaves would not be able to rise above the status of their parents. This belief led Linda Brown's parents and the NAACP to defeat segregated schooling. And it is this belief that keeps education at the center of the modern-day movement for social justice.

Brown v. Board of Education built a launching pad for education in the 21st century by removing barriers to equality and opening doors to opportunity. African Americans gained the confidence that their children, and generations of children to come, would indeed have access to a better future. But somewhere along the way, America sputtered and lost its way.

Nearly 50 years after the end of desegregation, we are still only sending about one out of four students to college. In a knowledge-based economy, excluding three fourths of our students from higher education is no longer acceptable. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United States ranked 14th out of 34 OECD countries for reading skills, 17th for science and a below-average 25th for mathematics. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called this "an absolute wake-up call for America."

The time for tinkering and small-scale experimentation is over. In order to lead the world's global economy, we must create the world's brightest workforce. This starts by fixing our education so that all students can graduate college- and career-ready.

The NAACP recently released a report titled "Finding Our Way Back to First: Reclaiming World Leadership by Educating All America's Children." Our proactive agenda builds off the foundation laid by *Brown v. Board of Education*, and it is just as focused on quality as it is on access to education.

"Finding Our Way Back to First" offers research-informed prescriptions for tapping the potential of our students. The NAACP is asking its more than 1,200 active units to advocate for the following reforms:

First, all students should have a strong educational foundation before kindergarten. This means high quality, universal prekindergarten that supports strong literacy and language skills.

Second, we need effective teachers and leaders. Every school, regardless of location and resources, should have a strongly prepared, well-supported teacher in every classroom.

Third, students need more time for more learning. This means longer school days, longer school years and more years of education. Schools also need to offer broad-based programs that extend beyond the regular school day, year and curriculum.

Finally, we need to target our resources at those schools that need them most. We should direct additional state funds to school districts with high concentrations of low-income students. And we should target funds from all levels to help those schools and students who are struggling hardest to achieve.

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The NAACP earned its reputation in education by removing obstacles that blocked children from learning. But now is the time for proactive reform. To make the promise of a better life for our children real, we must support student learning and achievement. We must be determined to help every child reach his or her full potential and thereby ensure that we, as a nation, lead and serve globally.

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