

OPINION

Falling Short on a Public Education

Budgets balanced on the backs of children

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Once upon a time, America professed to believe in a strong public education system. While we still talk about public education as the great equalizer that can offer a pathway out of poverty, the nation is falling far short in assuring millions of poor children, especially those of color, upward mobility.

As if children and families were not suffering enough during this economic downturn, too many states are choosing to balance budgets on the backs of children. They're shifting more costs away from government onto children and families who have fewer means to bear them. It's shameful.

Of the 46 states that publish data in a manner allowing historical comparisons,

37 are providing less funding per student to local school districts this school year than they provided last year, and 30 are providing less funding than they did four years ago.



Seventeen states have cut per-student funding more than 10 percent from pre-recession levels, and four, South Carolina, Arizona, California, and Hawaii, have reduced per-student funding for K-12 schools by more than 20 percent.

Since the Great Recession began, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, and other states have cut funding from early education programs to help close budget shortfalls. New Jersey cut funding for after-school programs. In a 2009 survey of California parents, 41 percent reported their child's school was cutting summer programs.

Cuts limiting student learning time are likely to intensify.

An American Association of School Administrators survey reports 17 per-

cent of respondents were considering shortening the school week to four days, and 40 percent were considering eliminating summer school programs.

Summer learning loss is a major contributor to the achievement gap between poor and children and their more affluent peers. Districts across the country are beginning to cut extracurricular activities and to charge fees for supplies like biology safety goggles or printer ink.

These spending cuts come at a time when American education is in dire straits.

The United States ranks 24th among 30 developed countries in overall educational achievement for 15-year-olds. A study of education systems in 60 countries ranks the United States 31st in math achievement and 23rd in science achievement for 15-year-olds.

More than 60 percent of all fourth, eighth, and 12th-grade public school students in every racial and income group are reading or doing math below grade level. Nearly 80 percent or more of African-American and Latino students

in these grades are reading or doing math below grade level.

Children should be getting more quality instructional time, not less, to prepare to compete in the rapidly globalizing economy. Instead they're being held back and provided fewer school days and hours by stopgap solutions to budget problems they didn't cause. Too many adults seem to lack the moral clarity and common sense for making decisions about what to cut and what to invest in.

How can we expect our children to create a better America if we don't give them a good education?

Cuts being proposed in Washington and in the states and localities around the country may be saving a few dollars on a balance sheet today, but tomorrow they will cost us dearly as a nation.

How shortsighted we are. Where are our priorities? What are our values?

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Race Baiting in the Republican Campaigns

Tactics appeal to people's fears

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the United States presidency gave many of us hope that, indeed, American issues of race – and how it relates to politics – had somewhat diminished.

We knew that we weren't yet a 'post racial' society, but we believed that Obama's election marked a giant leap forward.

Fast forward to 2012: the presidential race is heating up and Republican candidates are trying to establish ground in a crowded field. Comments by some of the presidential hopefuls clearly demonstrate that, although voters may have been able to look beyond race, our candidates are having a hard time doing the



same.

Republican Presidential candidate and former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, while speaking on the campaign trail about so-called entitled programs like Medicaid and food stamps, commented that he 'wants to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money.' Santorum

Santorum and Gingrich, with their statements, have put black face on programs that provide necessary assistance to the needy.

has backed off of those statements, saying he was misheard. But we know better.

To add insult to injury, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich recently

stated that he was going to travel to the NAACP convention to "tell the African-American community why they should demand paychecks instead of food stamps."

Santorum and Gingrich, with their statements, have put black face on programs that provide necessary assistance to the needy. This harkens back to Ronald

are flat out misinformed. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of entitlement program beneficiaries are white. Over 60 percent of welfare recipients are white, 33 percent are black, and whites receive 34 percent of federal food assistance while African-Americans receive 22 percent.

Far too often, race baiting in political campaigns has been used as a way to appeal to the latent racist sentiments of voters.

By playing off of people's fears, candidates try to grow their popularity and, hopefully, sweep into office. We've come too far in society for politics to revert back to these tactics. While Obama's history-making victory may have shown how much we've grown, these recent developments show just how much more work we have to do.

Judge Mathis is a longtime advocate for equal justice. His life story of a street youth who rose from jail to judge has provided hope to millions.

Reagan who, while running for president in 1976, spoke of the mythical welfare queen who, in his descriptions, was African-American and a drain on society.

Like Reagan, Santorum and Gingrich

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