

I applaud President Obama's leadership to improve America's public education. I agree with him. "The future belongs to the nation [and state] that can best educate its citizens."

The President offered a smorgasbord of new and old proposals for improving education, from early childhood to postsecondary. There are too many initiatives to detail here. Many of them are worthwhile; some are long overdue.

I regret, however, that the President's emphasis was on the so-called "failure" of those responsible for providing our children's education, especially teachers. I wish that he had first cited the politicians who have failed to provide our schools with the resources necessary for success.

During the past several years, I have visited hundreds of schools and classrooms throughout Minnesota. Their most common problem is that elementary classrooms are overcrowded with 25 to 30 children, and too many high school classes have over 40 students. I spent my first two years after college teaching ninth-grade general science to classes of 32 students in a New York City public school. I know how extremely difficult an overcrowded classroom is -- for students and for teachers.

The President called for longer school days and school years; yet one Minnesota district can only afford to provide school four days a week. Other schools are also considering reduced schedules. They have already eliminated

advanced courses, special help, after-school activities, and sports, all because of funding cuts.

“Accountability” should begin by holding politicians responsible for providing good teachers and other dedicated professionals with the resources needed to reach and teach diverse student bodies. “Back to the Basics” in public education means adequately funding the programs that have proven themselves effective in helping students to succeed, such as Head Start, special education, and college student aid.

Head Start. The President was right to stress the importance of early childhood education, as former Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser, former MN Business Partnership Chairman James Rainier, and other civic and education leaders did 25 years ago. Head Start proved its benefits to young children almost 40 years ago; yet Congress still provides funding for less than half of all the children eligible for it.

Special Education. When Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act over 30 years ago and mandated special education programs in all public schools, it promised to pay for 40% of those costs. It funds less than half that amount today. I offered seven different amendments in the Senate to fully fund that federal promise, at the annual cost of one month of the Iraq War. All were defeated.

College Student Aid. It’s shameful that Minnesota’s public college students and their parents are forced to pay some of the country’s highest

tuitions. They deserve to benefit from the President's proposals to increase student financial aid and to eliminate some of the worst private profiteering from those programs.

Some people say we cannot afford to spend more money to educate our children. I say we cannot afford not to. Well-educated and productive Minnesotans have been crucial to our state's past social and economic successes. By short-changing education, we are sacrificing our future.