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Contact:

Steve Gorski, The Source for Learning, 703-860-9200, sgorski@sflinc.org

John Cosgrove, Cosgrove Communications, 412-621-3668, jc@cosgrove.com

The Obama Education Plan—A Response

RESTON, VA – An education nonprofit that serves teachers and learners across the nation and around the world is offering a provocative response to President Obama's new plan for improving American education.

The Source for Learning (www.sourceforlearning.org) creates technology-based content for the parents and teachers of preschool and K-12 children. SFL agrees with President Obama that this is a critical time for American education, and offers specific thoughts about major components of the President's plan.

Obama plan: Invest in early childhood initiatives.

SFL comment: Expand the benefits through third grade.

The evidence is overwhelming that high-quality early learning is a major advantage in preparing young children not just for school, but eventually for work and for life. The Source for Learning strongly supports the President's plan to improve the quality and availability of early learning programs.

A recent study by James Heckman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist from the University of Chicago, is one of several that describe the dramatic outcomes for society resulting from high-quality early education intervention programs.

However, there is little data to indicate that current pre-K programs have a positive impact on learning outcomes beyond third grade. In fact, current data collected from high-quality early childhood programs show that although children enter kindergarten at or above national norms, they begin to decline in performance during the kindergarten year.

Therefore, SFL believes we need a broader, more comprehensive vision to address continued school success by expanding the scope of early childhood education. Early childhood spans the years of birth through age eight. The Pre-K through third grade years account for more than a third of elementary and secondary education. During this period, children develop the foundational skills for later school success.

The Society for Research in Child Development, composed of leading child development researchers, has endorsed a Pre-K through third grade approach that would align standards,

curriculum, and assessment practices across classrooms serving 3-8 year-olds. The alignment is linked to the children's developmental characteristics and abilities. Some school districts have already discovered the wisdom in this approach and have begun to design high-quality Pre-K-3 programs. Recent studies have indicated that children who do not experience Pre-K-3 program components are behind their peers on indicators of school success such as math and reading skills; teacher reports of proficiency and positive approach to learning; grade retention; and special education.

SFL also stresses the importance of strong curricula that are (1) based on developmentally appropriate practice and (2) tied to ongoing assessment to ensure that teachers can provide appropriate instruction to each individual child. One size never fits all.

Obama plan: Encourage better standards and assessments.

SFL comments: Thinking counts, not remembering.

The current model for teaching and learning standards is outdated and does not meet the demands and expectations of the modern world. The Source for Learning believes that the key to learning in the twenty-first century is the ability to retrieve, critically evaluate, and work with information, not just remember it. Today's workplace—and civic responsibility—demand thinking adults who will continually seek new information and develop new ideas.

To this end, assessing students' skills must look more at how they process and use the constantly-evolving volume of information they encounter. It is critically important to make this process-oriented approach to teaching and learning standards a priority. Both the National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS-S) from the International Society for Technology in Education and the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner from American Association for School Librarians articulate this process-oriented priority for learning. They can serve as strong, overarching frameworks for subject-matter standards.

Obama plan: Recruit, prepare, and reward outstanding teachers.

SFL comments: Peers promote professionalism; Create multi-dimensional student assessments.

Studies show that a good teacher has a greater impact on students' learning than any other variable. The Source for Learning strongly believes that good teachers should be rewarded and ineffective teachers be redirected into more productive avenues. In a pre-election survey conducted among users of SFL's TeachersFirst.com website, 81% identified "Devise fair ways to reward teaching that is inspired and inspiring" as a top priority for the incoming administration. [see <http://www.teachersfirst.com/SpecialQofWk-results4.cfm>].

The heart of the challenge is defining and measuring merit, and SFL believes that the ideal way to accomplish that is through evaluation by a professional learning network, and personal learning networks of individual teachers. Encouraging teachers to strive for increasing levels of professional and subject expertise and to share their discoveries with their peers builds a community of learners among teachers, and also creates the ideal model for students. Teachers should be rewarded for setting ambitious personal goals and for achieving them in accordance with rigorous peer evaluations, just as college and university faculty are. Both novice and experienced teachers should share in this process throughout their careers, and teachers should have time and resources available to continue this process.

To the extent that student “achievement” tests are used to evaluate the performance of both teachers and students, SFL believes that schools should use nationally-normed tests as one measure of achievement, rather than single-state tests with criteria references that in some situations may make students appear more successful than they actually are. Complementary, curriculum-based assessments should also be part of the package to get a true “big picture” of a student’s achievement. A portfolio of student work, assessed by well-designed protocols, provides a far clearer picture of a student’s accomplishments than a filled-in bubble sheet. Models for these assessments already exist, and best practices should be shared.

Obama plan: Promote innovation and excellence in America’s schools.

SFL comments: Include parents, creativity, and technology.

Source for Learning emphasizes five critical points about excellence in schools.

- (1) Parents play a vital role in their children’s education, whatever the child’s age. Schools can take a major step toward promoting excellence by involving parents, helping them understand their children’s development, and encouraging them to be active learning role models.
- (2) Good schools cultivate an atmosphere that encourages creative teachers to inspire a love of learning rather than the mere mastery of facts. There are exemplary schools and teachers that promote collective innovation in spite of “the system,” but more innovation will happen if the system encourages and rewards it.
- (3) Technology provides a game-changing, cost-effective way to expand the learning process outside “formal” school hours and into a world-wide community. Extending responsibility for learning beyond school walls can involve more students and expand the opportunities for all students. And technology provides real-world opportunities and connections that can draw students back into the formal education process in new and more meaningful ways.
- (4) To capitalize on the power of technology, we must work to ensure that all students have regular, safe access to the computers and high-speed networks that can deliver this wealth of information. Barriers may include location or economic circumstance, but libraries, new network technologies, and smaller, less expensive laptops are among the resources that could create more equal access among all students. SFL is encouraged that elements of the administration’s broadband access program focus on the needs of schools and students; this focus should be retained.
- (5) Technology can also streamline or make transparent some of the bureaucratic aspects of education that frustrate those who learn differently, or who confront other barriers to learning in their lives. Thoughtful, consistent use of technology to manage time-consuming tasks of record keeping, governmental compliance, and reporting can free time for education professionals at all levels. Best practice models for these tasks are available; communicating and facilitating these practices will be an important challenge. Individual learners may also need multiple ways to view or access information, or varied tools for constructing new content. Improved, technology-driven access to support services can make learning a positive, individualized experience. Continued and ongoing support for innovations that remove individual and bureaucratic barriers to essential information is vital.

Finally, SFL encourages the administration to recognize that these goals need to be implemented as an integrated set, not in isolation, because they are interdependent in many ways. Achieving this will require collaboration among a diverse group of state and federal agencies, each of which will need to be persuaded that cooperation is ultimately the best way to achieve its own objectives. The administration may need to reinforce this concept from time to time, and SFL hopes it will do so with the same level of energy that created the plan itself.

The Source for Learning, Inc. (www.sourceforlearning.org) is a not-for-profit company whose websites offer teachers, students, and parents the web's best collection of learning resources. Compiled and reviewed by education professionals, the resources cover countless subjects and support diverse learning styles. Together, they enhance education at every level. Launched more than 25 years ago, Source for Learning has become a "must have" asset in early learning settings, K-12 classrooms, and homes in the U.S. and more than 50 countries.

SFL's nonprofit services include www.TeachersFirst.com, www.PreschoolFirst.com, www.TeachersAndFamilies.com, and the upcoming www.GrowUpLearning.com, slated to launch in 2009.

Through its network of licenses for Educational Broadband Service microwave channels, Source for Learning also serves educational entities across the country, and is in the vanguard of the development of "anytime/anywhere" high-speed online access for education.

Experts from The Source for Learning are available to discuss any component of the Obama education plan. Please see the contact information at the beginning of this release.

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