

**Remarks to the
Century Foundation Conference
September 14, 2000
National Press Club**

Thank you for having this meeting and for the opportunity to participate in it.

I take the subject of education of poor children very seriously and very personally, having grown up in a Coney Island slum. If not for the New York City public schools, I don't know where I'd be, but it wouldn't be here.

I've spend my life fighting for the kids and teachers in poor urban schools; I've been a participant in three law suits seeking equitable funding for them, including one still wending its way through the New York courts.

I've stood in front of angry, dispirited teachers, who elected me and told them their union was supporting the closing and redesign of their school even though its abysmal failure was not their fault.

And I have the scars to show for it.

So it really irks me when supposed liberals, like Robert Reich, who definitely should know better, cavalierly propose cute schemes, like a so-called “progressive” voucher, which would give poor parents an amount of money equal or better than their entire annual family income so they can send their children to Dalton or its equivalent.

Excellent public schools for all poor children are an absolute necessity. And they are not only possible, they exist.

And we know all about what makes them work.

If poor kids went to schools that had just some of the basics more advantaged children can take for granted – a high-quality preschool experience, smaller class sizes, well-educated teachers, just for starters – most them would be achieving at the same levels as more advantaged youngsters.

Because there is nothing wrong with the children, my friends.

But there is something wrong with our political will.

There is something wrong with the wealthiest nation in the world when it doesn't provide for its kids when every other advanced nation does.

And that's not because Americans don't care. They do. They want to do this, as Roy Teixari has shown us, they express it in every poll and survey.

But they are wary of waste, don't want to "throw money" at problems, are afraid it won't get spent on kids, want it spent on things they believe in – like smaller classes, good teachers and better discipline.

They know poor kids get a lot less spent on their education; and they don't think that's fair.

They don't want to rob Peter to pay Paul; they don't want money taken from wealthier districts and given to poor districts; but they will support "leveling up." The will support meeting the needs of neediest kids.

The public attitude is there – what we need is a vehicle around which to rally and focus support.

So I want to make a proposal for an experiment in basic educational fairness, something that's never been done before in America; and one that's affordable and doable, especially in this new economy with surpluses available.

Let's provide targeted resources to ensure that all schools serving poor children who are low-achieving can put what works in place: quality early childhood education, lower class sizes, especially in the early grades, a focus on high standards, and qualified teachers.

We could start doing this right now, in this congressional and legislative season, by using the Title I program which sends federal funding to disadvantaged kids where ever they are, in urban, rural, or private schools, for specific educational purposes.

With that – or some other legislative vehicles, we can help those schools pay for good teachers, provide special help including longer days and years for kids who need it,

provide high quality alternative settings for chronically disruptive children. We can even help them fix leaky roofs, install technology, or build new buildings to replace trailers or otherwise relieve overcrowding.

We can do that by building coalitions of religious, labor and people of good will generally; by electing candidates who promise to make these kinds of investments – like Al Gore and Joe Lieberman – and keeping those coalitions together to make it happen.

This is the time to get it done: the money's there, we know what works; there is support as never before for a national role in education.

Let's do a grand experiment in paying for what works for poor children.