

Isaac Marks Memorial Lecture

**A SENATOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON AMERICAN  
HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Senator Edward M. Kennedy<sup>\*</sup>

Thank you very much, Dean Massaro, for your extremely kind, warm, and generous introduction and for all that you do at the College of Law. The only correction I would make in your introduction is that I was the youngest child of nine. There are thirty in the next generation, and seventy-eight in the following generation, and of them sixty-two are twelve or younger. And so the interest in education is long and continuing and will be for some period of time.

You have to say that I love the James Rogers College of Law and the University of Arizona, or else why would I be here when the Red Sox are playing the Yankees? So you have to wonder about the judgment of your speaker here tonight, at least the planning of this, so if suddenly someone slips me a paper, it is going to be good news, because we need some good news after the first four innings.

I am really delighted and honored to join all of you. I want to thank Jim Rogers for his support for this distinguished college of law, which has graduated so many of my colleagues in the Congress and the Senate over a long and distinguished past. Thank you also for all of your good work, Jim, and support for so many other educational institutions across the country. You are really turning dreams into reality for large numbers of men and women. All of us are grateful for everything that you and Beverly do every single day for education and for the young people all over our country.

It is an honor to deliver the Isaac Marks Memorial Lecture. I am very grateful for the invitation. I join in commending Selma Marks for her generosity

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<sup>\*</sup> Senator Edward M. Kennedy has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since he was first elected in 1962 to finish the term of his brother, President John F. Kennedy. Since then, he has been reelected seven times, and he is now the second most senior member of the Senate. This lecture is transcribed from his spoken remarks at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Isaac Marks Memorial Lecture on Oct. 12, 2004.

and for making this annual lecture possible. Going to law school in the time that she did, in the middle 1950s, shows her extraordinary resilience, imagination, toughness, inquisitiveness, and so many other extraordinary qualities. I think all of us know that she has them in abundance now, including energy, energy, energy; she is a tireless, wonderful person of this community. Selma and Isaac have given so much to the University and to this community, and this lecture is a fitting tribute. It is the gift that keeps on giving, and I am proud to have an opportunity to give it.

It is a privilege to be with all of you at this distinguished university. They say the reason why universities are such great storehouses of knowledge is that every entering student brings a little knowledge in and no graduate ever takes any knowledge out. But I know that is not true at Arizona. Our nation's great public universities are shining examples of the best of America's ideals. You are into the ages of new ideas and expanding minds and positive values. You promote understanding among all whose lives you touch, and you give back to your community in countless ways. Here at this college of law, you create needed respect in these difficult times for the basic truth that our laws are the wise restraints that make us free.

It is this sense of common responsibility and shared purpose that is so remarkable about college communities across the country, and I am sure it is true here, as well. In fact, throughout our history, progress has been achieved not only when we respect the basic freedoms of each individual, but also when we open the doors of opportunity to entire communities of Americans.

A century and a half ago, our ancestors fought a civil war to end slavery, and when the war had ended, they had the wisdom not to stop with the Thirteenth Amendment. They added the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in an effort to guarantee as fully as possible the rights of all of our citizens and especially to empower all people of color to come out of the shadows and into the sunshine of American life. Each subsequent generation has recognized that civil rights are still the unfinished business of America. The battle for civil rights in the 1960's was not just for individual rights, but because we recognized that we are a lesser nation when entire groups of citizens are relegated to lesser lives as second-class Americans.

Millions of Americans followed the call of Cesar Chavez to improve the plight of this nation's farm workers and bring an end to the harvest of shame because we understood what was at stake. It was not solely about individual rights. It was about an America diminished by the subjugation of an entire class of workers.

*E pluribus unum*: out of many, one. This is more than just America's motto. Those three words state our founding ideal. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The nation as a whole receives extra strength when its component parts are strengthened. Throughout our history, that has been our national story again and again, as we have sought to form the more perfect union the founders envisioned.

This evening I want to talk to you about the aspect of that struggle that relates to education. The founders understood the importance of education to the strength of the democracy that they created. They saw it not just as an individual right, but as a means of creating informed and active citizens. Thomas Jefferson said that no nation can be both ignorant and free. John Adams believed so strongly in the role of schools in a democracy that he included these words in the Massachusetts Constitution, which he wrote:

Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of people, it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this Commonwealth to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools, and grammar schools in the towns . . .<sup>1</sup>

In Massachusetts we know that John Adams was onto something. Last year, our state's eighth graders tied for first in the nation in reading and second in math, and we all know what has become of the university at Cambridge. Over the generations, we have come to understand the importance of education to our country in every basic way. In the middle of the civil war, Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Land Grant College Act,<sup>2</sup> and millions of students are being educated today in public colleges and universities first created by that landmark law.

Franklin Roosevelt signed the GI Bill of Rights in 1944,<sup>3</sup> and millions of veterans came home from war and went on to college. We all know that education is the most effective way to open the doors of opportunity for the disadvantaged. The greatest generation is well named, because those who fought against tyranny in the Second World War came home and fought against inequality and injustice and outright bigotry at home. They understood that separate is unequal, and they were willing to give their lives for their cause of simple justice.

We understand even more clearly today the role of education in the strength of our economy. We know that in this increasingly competitive global economy, our schools must be up to the task of training the next generation of Americans. More than ever, the education of every person counts. No community in our country can be left behind if we are to meet and master the challenges of the twenty-first century, not just for our economy but also for our security and our survival. It is no accident that our service academies—West Point, the Navel Academy, and the Air Force Academy—have among the strongest diversity admission policies in America. Our military leaders were among the first to step forward to defend diversity admissions when the issue came before the Supreme

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1. MASS. CONST. of 1780, pt. 2 ch. 5, § 2 (current version at MASS. GEN. LAWS CONST. ch. 5, § 2 (2005)).

2. Morrill (Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges) Acts, ch. 130, 12 Stat. 503 (1862).

3. Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, ch. 266, 58 Stat. 283.

Court. They know that by defending diversity in our schools, we also defend our nation by preparing the best possible armed forces in the face of modern threats.

The Supreme Court said it well, with extraordinary prescience, about exactly that point in *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>4</sup> fifty years ago:

Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our Democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening a child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right [that] must be available to all on equal terms.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most pressing questions of our time is: How do we get there? How do we strengthen education to increase opportunity for all and meet the great global challenges of our own generation? An extraordinary and increasingly passionate debate has taken place in recent decades. On one side are those who believe that public school education is solely a local matter with local citizens determining what is appropriate for their communities. On the other side are those who believe that there is also an essential national role in opening the doors of opportunities for all Americans and equipping our country to face the future. The debate continues in full force today and is a central philosophical difference in the presidential campaign.

In fact, the differences expressed in this campaign echo those of another campaign in another time. In 1960, Senator John Kennedy and Vice President Nixon engaged in a frank debate about how to approach education. Their views could not have been further apart. Vice President Nixon warned against undesirable and unnecessary federal intrusion in this critical area of our national life. My brother argued that emergency federal education was needed to halt the decline in American education. We know who won that debate and went on as President to propose the first comprehensive federal law providing federal aid for public schools. In the 1980s, President Reagan and his Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell, issued their landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*,<sup>6</sup> that left no doubt about the ominous implication of an uneducated America and set the stage for a passionate revival of the debate over the appropriate role in improving the nation's public schools.

In the 1990s, Newt Gingrich and his Contract with America pushed the argument to the edge by calling for the elimination of the Department of Education and by proposing a budget to cut federal education funds by forty billion dollars a

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4. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

5. *Id.* at 493.

6. NAT'L COMM'N ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUC., U.S. DEP'T EDUC., *A NATION AT RISK: THE IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM* (1983).

year. With President Clinton, the nation focused again on federal standards for all schools. After much debate and with strong Republican opposition, Congress approved the President's Goals 2000 Act,<sup>7</sup> setting national goals for local schools for the new century. President Clinton's White House promoted national programs to help local schools hire additional teachers and adopt smaller class sizes.

Today with the Bush administration, the contending philosophies are unfolding an uneasy compromise, embracing national goals in the No Child Left Behind Act,<sup>8</sup> but leaving local schools without adequate resources to achieve them. We know that the reforms in the No Child Left Behind Act will work, because their effectiveness has been proved again and again in a wide variety of public schools across the country. We know that all students are capable of greater achievement when standards are raised. We know that adequate assessments can easily diagnose the learning needs of students and provide the foundation for specific school reforms and greater school improvement. Tests alone are not the answer, but they clearly point the way. We know that a fair way to hold schools accountable can lead to higher performance for all students and help close the achievement gap.

We are doing that in Massachusetts, and there is no question that it is working. But we also know reforms will not work on a threadbare budget. It takes resources to achieve success, and the need is greatest in the poorest communities that serve the neediest children.

The current administration and current Congress have increased federal funding for the No Child Left Behind Act by \$6.3 billion over the past few years, but the nonpartisan estimate of the needed funding was twenty-seven billion dollars higher. The result is that 4.6 million students are being left behind, and schools and parents are up in arms because the goals seem so clearly out of reach. American public education used to be second to none, and we cannot settle for being second best.

Obviously, money is not the only answer to improving schools, but it is the indispensable foundation for other reforms. Without it, all the talk of school reform is nothing more than talk. Once the resources are available, we know that we can meet the widely accepted basic goals of class sizes that are smaller, teachers who are more qualified, schools that are safer, and students who are better educated.

Another key aspect of education now coming into greater focus is early childhood education. The obvious comparison is in preventive healthcare. We can save billions of dollars on elementary and secondary education if we start paying more than lip service to the commitment that every child who shows up in first grade is ready to learn. Dollar for dollar, the millions we spend on age-appropriate education for our very young children are the wisest and most cost-effective education dollars America will ever spend. It is society's vaccine against ignorance and poverty and civil strife.

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7. Goals 2000: Educate America Act, Pub. L. 103-227, 108 Stat. 125 (1994).

8. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425.

In many families today, the parents are men and women who were the first in their families to go to college. Their own parents survived the Great Depression, worked hard, saved money, and sent them to college so that they could have a brighter future. But for vast numbers of children in today's families, college is increasingly out of reach. Nationwide tuition at four-year public colleges has increased by thirty-eight percent over the past four years. Here at the University of Arizona, I understand that tuition increased by nearly fourteen percent this year and a record thirty-nine percent in 2003. It is shameful that college federal aid has not kept pace with rising tuition. Twenty years ago, a Pell grant covered over eighty percent of the cost of a four-year college education. Today it covers less than forty percent. Twenty years ago, the typical package of college aid was sixty percent grants and forty percent loans. Today the ratio is reversed, and the grant-loan imbalance is getting worse.

Each year more than 400,000 high school graduates who qualify for college do not attend full-time because they cannot pay the bill. The average low-income college students have \$3,800 a year in college costs not covered by grants, loans, work or family. Their dropout rate is far higher than for any other students. We cannot allow the current situation to continue.

Men and women with a college degree now earn seventy-five percent more than those without it. That is a million dollars more in earnings over a lifetime. Jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education are estimated to account for over forty percent of total job growth over the next decade. More than ever in this new century, it is essential to make the opportunity of college education a reality for all. It is time to make college security a promise to every young American. If you work hard, finish high school, and are accepted by college, Uncle Sam should guarantee that you can afford the cost of the four years it takes to earn a degree. Surely we have reached a stage in America where we can say it and mean it. Cost should never ever be a disqualification for a well-qualified student to go to college.

Fulfilling these commitments will require a new resolve by everyone: families, colleges, states, and the federal government. Families should pay more, but only what they can afford. Colleges should commit to do more to keep tuition increases down. States should continue as much support as they can for students, even in hard economic times. Federal support should make up the gap that remains. This is true for education as a whole. The nation gets more out of it in the long term than we invest in the short term. We see this with the GI Bill. The late Senator Barry Goldwater, the father of modern conservatism, understood the national purpose behind the GI Bill. He knew that this historic program was more than the thanks of a grateful nation to our troops for their service in the Second World War. He understood that we needed to rebuild America's economy and America's labor force after years of war. The best way to do that was to train a new generation of workers and leaders for the new challenges that lay ahead. Barry Goldwater knew a wise investment when he saw one. For every dollar invested in the GI Bill, we see a seven dollar return for our economy.

In that spirit, we created the federal program called AmeriCorps to encourage young Americans to serve their communities in return for college

financial aid, and the participants are changing lives all across the country. With other senators, I have introduced legislation based on the principles of quality, affordability, and diversity in higher education. The legislation will improve access to college in several ways. First, it helps students pay for college by providing more financial aid. We increase the maximum Pell grant by nearly \$500 to ease the impact of rising tuition costs. We expand the tax credit available to low income and middle class families for tuition and make it refundable. We increase support for campus-based financial aid such as college work study grants. In addition, we try to slow the excessive increase in tuition by creating incentives for colleges to adopt voluntary limits. We encourage college coalitions; colleges can save substantial amounts by bulk purchasing to meet as many needs as possible. With lower operating costs, it will be easier for colleges to restrain tuition increases.

We also make the repayment of student loans less costly. We create new refinancing options for borrowers now saddled with consolidated loans at high interest rates. We save taxpayer money by rewarding student and school participation in the Direct Loan Program of the Department of Education by being more vigilant about profiteering by private lenders.

More than almost any other federal initiative, the Direct Lending Program promises college loans at the lowest possible interest rates. To repeat the analogy to health care, it is like Medicare for college students. Inevitably, private lenders charge the highest interest rates possible to keep their shareholders content. In the Direct Lending Program, the shareholders are the American people, and they do not expect Uncle Sam to act the same way.

Under our proposal, half of the savings would be returned to universities for student financial aid. We also forgive a substantial portion of the debt for students who graduate and work in the public sector. We allow all graduates to refinance their student loans, just as their families refinance home mortgages. I believe we can lower interest rates on student loans in other ways, such as by auctioning federal loan approvals only to the lowest bidding lenders. Conservatives say they believe that competition in the marketplace provides better and cheaper options for consumers. We should apply that same principle to student loans. The federal government conducts auctions today in many other programs. We auction treasury securities. We auction housing loans, health education assistance loans, the FCC wireless spectrum, federal oil reserves, the WIC infant formula program, EPA pollution rights, land conservation rights, timber sales, and much more—all to get the lowest rates possible. Why not student loans?

We also encourage and reward students working their way through college. Current law reduces financial aid by fifty cents for every dollar they earn. Our proposal exempts the first \$9,000 earned by traditional college students and the first \$18,000 earned by adults attending college. Students who work to support their college education deserve this additional assistance.

Finally, we help minority and low-income students attend and finish college through greater funding for information and counseling about college preparation, admission, and financial aid. Increased funding will be available for Hispanic-serving institutions and historically black colleges and universities, which are the source of a large proportion of minority graduates from college.

In these modern times, we must recognize that learning is a lifetime enterprise. Education is the key to the golden door of opportunity. We cannot allow it to stay locked for any in our society. I hope that the President we elect three weeks from now will agree that all aspects of education, from the earliest childhood years through college, deserve a new and higher priority. I am certain Congress can be persuaded to go along.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening and for all you will do in the years ahead to help our nation live up to the ideals that are our guiding star.