

President Obama's Education Agenda

President Obama laid out an ambitious agenda for overhauling federal education policy during a March 10 address to the national Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. In the audience was Education Secretary Arne Duncan, a longtime friend and close adviser to Obama. The president called for:

Early Childhood Initiatives

- Providing early-learning challenge grants to states that develop plans to raise the quality of early-education programs.
- Creating a program under which 55,000 first-time parents would receive visits at home from nurses (under the Department of Health and Human Services).
- Expanding Head Start and Early Head Start (also under HHS).

Teaching as a Profession

- Recruiting a new generation of teachers and allowing teachers to enter the profession through alternative certification programs and non-traditional routes.
- Providing incentives for teachers who work in economically disadvantaged schools and for those who teach math and science.
- Expanding existing federal support for model programs that tie teacher compensation to measurements of performance.
- Establishing mentor programs where established teachers help train newer ones.

Public School Standards and Assessments

- Giving states incentives to adopt internationally benchmarked academic standards.
- Insisting that states develop standards and assessments that measure problem-solving and critical thinking skills.
- Requiring that federal aid to states under the 2002 education law known as No Child Left Behind be tied to not yet specified measurements of school success.

Innovation in Elementary and Secondary Education

- Making states lift any caps on their maximum number of charter schools.
- Lengthening the school day and year by adding after-school and summer programs.
- Providing money for efforts to prevent lower-income students from dropping out.

Assisting Higher Education

- Simplifying the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that all college students must use in seeking federally backed loans and other assistance.
- Increasing the maximum Pell grant award to \$5,550, indexing the grants to rise at a faster pace than inflation and making Pell grant spending mandatory — and no longer subject to appropriations that in the past limited awards.
- Making permanent a \$2,500-a-year college tuition tax credit that was included in the economic stimulus law as a temporary benefit.
- Eliminating subsidies to student loan providers under the Family Federal Education Loan program.
- Expanding the Perkins Loan Program that provides low-interest financing to needy students at specified post-secondary schools.