

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Town Hall Meeting at North High School in Des Moines, Iowa

September 14, 2015

The President. Everybody, give it up for Russhaun! Hello, Iowa! Well, it is good to be back in Iowa. I was missing you guys. Go Polar Bears! It is great to be back in Des Moines. You know, I landed at the airport and saw the Hampton Inn there that I—I must have stayed there, like, a hundred days. [*Laughter*] I'm sure I've got some points or something. I could get a couple free nights at the Hampton Inn. [*Laughter*]

Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Relax. And I know——

Audience member. [*Inaudible*]

The President. [*Laughter*] I know it's September, so I know you guys are all about to be flooded with ads and calls from a bunch of folks who want this job. [*Laughter*] I just can't imagine what kind of person would put themselves through something like this. [*Laughter*] Although, I noticed—I didn't know Russhaun was on the ballot. During the introduction, he was all, like, "the next President of the United States."

We could not be prouder of Russhaun, not just for the introduction, but for the inspiring story that he's told. I think it's an example of what our young people can do when they put their minds to it.

I want to thank your principal, Mike Vukovich. Where's Mike? There he is. Your superintendent is here; Tom Ahart is here. Where's Tom? Your mayor, Frank Cownie, is here, who is a great friend. Where's Frank? He was here. [*Laughter*] He had to go to a city council meeting. He's missing out on the fun. Iowa attorney general and great friend of mine, Tom Miller. Treasurer Mike Fitzgerald, great supporter. And of course, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, for letting me crash his bus tour.

And so I'm not going to give a long speech, because we want to spend most of the time taking questions from all of you. But I just want to explain that we came to North High School because you guys have done some great things over the past few years: making sure more students have laptops and iPads, more AP classes, improving test scores. And so you've become a great example for the whole country of what's possible.

And so we thought we'd come to pay you a visit, talk with some of the students here in Des Moines and your parents. Because I know that there's nothing that high schoolers love more than being in public with their moms and dads. [*Laughter*] I know that. That's what Malia and Sasha tell me all the time. [*Laughter*]

It was 7 years ago this week that a financial crisis on Wall Street ended up ushering in some really hard years on Main Street. But thanks to the incredible resilience and grit and hard work of the American people, we've bounced back. We've created 13.1 million new private sector jobs over the past 5½ years. We've helped more than 16 million people have the security of health insurance, many of them for the first time. Our high school graduation rate is the highest that it has ever been. And I should point out, by the way, if you want to see the best graduation rate in America, it's right here in Iowa.

So we've been investing in things that help to grow the middle class and help provide opportunity for every young person. But no 21st-century economy is—nobody in a 21st-century economy is going to be able to do what they want to do with their lives unless they've got a great education. That's just the truth. By 2020, two in three job openings are going to require some form of post-high school education, whether it's a 4-year university or a community college or a tech school. And it's an investment that pays off.

Now, partly it pays off—and Russhaun mentioned this—because it empowers you. It gives you a sense of who you are and your hopes and your dreams. It helps to sharpen how you see the world and empowers you in all sorts of ways. But it also has some pretty practical ramifications. Compared to a high school diploma, a degree from a 2-year school could earn you an extra \$10,000 a year; a 4-year degree could earn you a million dollars more over the course of your lifetime. That's how important education is in today's economy.

And here's the thing: Just as higher education has never been more important, let's face it, it's also never been more expensive. And that's why Arne and I have been working to try to make college and post-high school education more affordable. We've increased scholarships. We reformed our student loan system that funneled billions of taxpayer dollars into big banks; we said, let's cut out the middleman, let's put that money directly to students. We created a new tax credit of up to \$2,500 to help working families pay for tuition and books and fees. We're helping people cap their Federal student loan payments at 10 percent of their income. So if you want to be a teacher or you want to be a social worker or some other profession that may not make a huge amount of money, you can still do that, knowing that you're not going to go—you're still going to be able to afford to support yourself and your family while doing it. And we're fighting for 2 years of free community college for any student that's willing to work for it.

The bottom line is, is that no young person in America should be priced out of college. They should not be priced out of an education.

And I know that finding the right school for you, the best school for you is a tough process. Malia is going through it right now. You guys are juggling deadlines and applications and personal statements. And some of you are, in the back of your mind, are asking yourselves what you plan for a career and what you want to do with your life.

I think we should make that process easier. So a couple of things that we've done that we're announcing over the course of this week during Arne's bus tour, we've introduced something called College Scorecard. Right now a lot of families don't have all the information they need to choose the right school. And a lot of the college ranking systems that you see, they reward schools just for spending more money or for rejecting more students. And I think that's the wrong focus. I think that our colleges should be focusing on affordability and on serving students and providing them good value.

So we've pulled together all sorts of data on college costs and value; we created this College Scorecard. And you can scroll through it to see which schools are more likely to graduate their students, are more likely to result in good jobs for those students, more likely to make sure that those students can pay off their student loans, and you can then use that information to make choices that are right for your future and right for your budget.

And so you guys can go to collegescorecard.ed.gov—collegescorecard.ed.gov—and we've already got half a million visits since we launched this thing on Saturday. So it's a valuable tool for students and parents as you're trying to make a decision about which school to go to.

We're also simplifying the financial aid process to give you more time as you make a decision. Right now about 2 million students don't claim the financial aid that they're eligible for. And part of it is, it's just complicated and time-consuming. And so those young people are leaving money on the table. And there may be some young people here who are not aware of all the financial help you can get. So what we've done is, we've shortened the Federal student aid form—it's called FAFSA—down to about 20 minutes. It used to be about two, three times as long. *[Laughter]*

And because only Congress has the power to eliminate certain requirements, we're asking them to simplify it even further. The good news is, it's got some good bipartisan support. In fact, we've got a Congressman here from Virginia who traveled with us—Congressman Bobby Scott—where's Bobby? He is—there he is way in the back there. And he's working—he's a Democrat—he's working with Republicans to see if we can further shorten and make this form simpler.

Today I'm also announcing that beginning next year, families will be able to fill out FAFSA even earlier: starting at—on October 1, right around the time that college applications ramp up. That means you won't have to wait for months for your W-2's to arrive before you can get started, so you can get a jump on the college application process. You'll know sooner how much aid you qualify for; you'll have more time to evaluate your options. And we're also working with colleges and universities and scholarship programs to align their application and their financial aid processes with this new FAFSA start date.

So all these steps taken together should help hundreds of thousands more students pay for college. And I know that's important to you.

I'm going to end my opening remarks with a story from somebody who couldn't be here today, but graduated from here last year, and his name is Neico Greene. You might remember Neico from the Polar Bear basketball team. And the reason that I want to tell his story is, for the past few years, Neico was homeless. As a junior and senior, he was grateful to mostly stay with his coach or his counselor. But before that, he spent nights in shelters and in church basements or in hotels with his mom, sometimes sleeping next to drug addicts or worse. And this is something Neico wrote. He said, "I've seen some terrible things . . . but I'm thankful for what I've been through because it's taught me to be strong."

And being strong meant studying. It meant keeping his eye on college, applying for and winning some scholarships. Last year, he filled out his FAFSA, found out he qualified for thousands of dollars of Federal and State aid. Today, Neico is a freshman at Graceland University. He's studying accounting. He's still playing ball, hoping to make enough money one day to build a career and give back to the mom that he loves.

So that's why we're here. That's what this is about. For students like Neico and Russhaun. Students like many of you who want to take that next step and have big dreams, we want you to know that we're there to help you achieve those dreams. We want to make sure that we're giving every student who's willing to put in the effort all the tools that they need in order to succeed.

That's not just good for the students, by the way. That's also good for America. Because this country was built on the notion that it doesn't matter where you come from, what you look like, what your last name is, if you're willing to work hard, you can make it. And education is the key to making that future possible. That's how we grow this country. That's how we make it

successful. And that's the incredible project, the great experiment in democracy that all of you are part of.

So with that, Arne and I are looking forward to taking your questions. Thank you very much, everybody.

All right. Can everybody hear me? Is this thing working?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. All right, so here's how this is going to work. You raise your hand, and I'll call on you. We're going to go girl, boy, girl, boy to make it fair. [*Laughter*] There should be people in the audience with microphones, so wait until they get there. And introduce yourself. Try to keep your question short enough that we can get as many questions in as possible.

And contrary to what Arne said, he's going to get all the tough questions, and I just want the easy ones. [*Laughter*] All right. So let's see—who wants to go first? Oh, well, this young lady, she shot her hand up quick. Right here. The—we need a microphone up here. All right.

Teachers

Q. Okay. Hi, my name is Angelica. And my question is for you. It's what do you believe the role of a teacher should be?

The President. What do I believe the role of the—of teacher should be? That's a great question. When I think about my own life, some of you may know, my dad left when I was very young, so I really didn't know him. So I was raised by a single mom. And we didn't have a lot when we were coming up, although my mom had this great love of learning. But she was a teenager when she had me; she was 18. And she was still going to school and working at the same time as she was raising me and then my sister.

She was my first great teacher. And what she taught me was compassion, caring about other people, but she also taught me to be curious. And when I think back to all the great teachers that I've had, it's not so much the facts that they've taught me, because I can get those from books, but it has been teachers who are able to spark in me a sense of curiosity, like, well, how does that work? Why are—is that the way it is? Who—somebody who has helped me want to learn more. That, to me, is the role of a great teacher. Somebody who can teach you to be so interested in the subject that you then start over time teaching yourself.

And I'll bet there are a lot of great teachers here. Part of the challenge, I think, for being a teacher is, is that sometimes students don't always appreciate good teachers, let's face it. Because I think sometimes we think education is something that you just receive from somebody else. It's passive. They just kind of pour knowledge in here.

But in fact, good teaching is a conversation that you're having with somebody where they're giving you not just answers, but also asking you questions and helping your brain get a workout and try to learn how to figure things out yourself.

And also, I think great teachers are somebody who's got—who have—are people who have confidence in you and have high expectations for you, and they see something in you where they get a sense of, you know what, you're important, and you can do amazing things. And when you feel that from a teacher, that's—that a teacher really thinks you've got something in you that's worth saying or writing or—those are the teachers that you remember. Those are the teachers that inspire you.

What do you think, Arne?

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. I'll be quick. I think it's a really, really good answer. It's—the only thing I would add is, I think great teachers see things in students that they don't even see in themselves and pull things out of you. And someone like Russ Haun, who talked publicly, mom was locked up—lots of folks could look at you and say, well, that's where he's going to go. Other teachers see him as a student body president, as a future teacher, as a future leader in the community. So those amazing teachers see things in us as kids. Those are the teachers I remember from my childhood, who saw things in me that I didn't even recognize in myself and helped to bring that to life.

The President. Great question. All right. I think it's a guy's turn now. Let's see. That gentleman right back there, right in the corner there.

2016 Presidential Election/Education Funding/Teachers

Q. Hi, my name is Dennis Nixon. I have a senior here at North High School. *[Laughter]* What's so funny?

The President. Are you the dad that's embarrassing—

Q. Maybe.

The President. Your daughter is just, like, "Oh, dad, God."

Q. Well, it's a give-and-take; they embarrass me, I'm going to embarrass them. *[Laughter]*

The President. Listen, I'm right there with you. So—*[laughter]*.

Q. Okay. In your opinion, of all the next Presidential candidates that are in line, which ones have the best ideas for education reform to make it more affordable and accessible?

The President. Well, you know, I—*[laughter]*. Let me—I'm going to beg off this question a little bit. The—I promise you, I'm generally going to give you straight answers. On this one, I'm going to wiggle around a little bit. *[Laughter]* Right now I'm going to try to stay out of the campaign season until it—partly because I can't keep track of all the candidates. *[Laughter]* So I'll wait until it's winnowed down a little bit before I have an opinion.

But here's what I can say: that a society's values are reflected in where we put our time, our effort, our money. It is not sufficient for us to say we care about education if we aren't actually putting resources into education.

Now, I am—both Arne and I have gotten some guff sometimes from even within our own party because we've said that money alone is not enough; that it's important for us, if a school isn't teaching consistently kids so that they can achieve, then we've got to change how we do things, in collaboration with teachers and principals and parents and students. We've got to figure out, how do we make it work better?

So a lot of the initiatives we've had in terms of increased accountability and encouraging more creativity and empowering teachers more, those don't cost money. But what we also know is that if science labs don't have the right equipment, then it's harder to teach science. If kids don't have access to broadband and laptops in their classrooms, then they're at a disadvantage to those kids who do. If you've got a school that doesn't have enough counselors, and so, come time to apply for college, there aren't enough counselors to go around and kids aren't getting the best advice that they need, then they may end up selling themselves short in terms of their ability to go to college.

So resources do matter. And part of the reason I'm making this point—so that when you're evaluating candidates, you pay attention to this—is, we're going to be having a major debate in Congress coming up, because the budget is supposed to be done by the end of this month. And so far, Congress has not come up with a budget. And there are some in the other party who are comfortable with keeping in place something called sequester, which is going to be—is going to result in significant cuts over the next several years in the amount of Federal support for education. And that's going to force then either layoffs or kids not getting the kinds of support that they need. It will have an effect on the education of students.

So I just want everybody to be clear, without endorsing any particular candidate's ideas, that if somebody is running for President and they say they're—they want to be the "education President," it means two things. One is that you care about every student doing well, not just some, because whoever is President is the President for all people, not just some people. That's point number one. And point number two is, is that you've got to be willing to provide the resources, particularly for communities that may not have as much of a property tax base so they can't always raise money on their own in order to help their students achieve.

All right? Anything you want to add on that?

Secretary Duncan. Just very quickly, again, without getting into this candidate or that, you've got about two dozen to choose from, and they all want your vote. Four questions I'd like you to ask every candidate, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal—it doesn't matter.

One, what are you willing to do to have more children have access to high-quality early childhood education? That's the best investment we can make. Two, what are you going to do to continue to increase our Nation's high school graduation rate? And we're very proud, it's at an alltime high, but it's nowhere near where it needs to be. Three, what are you going to do to make sure high school graduates are truly college and career ready and not having to take remedial classes in college, that they've been taught to high standards? And fourth, we need to lead the world in college graduation rates again. We were first a generation ago; today, we're 12th. Other countries have passed us by.

So if every candidate you ask, what are your concrete goals for those four things, and then what resources—to the President's point—are you willing to put behind that, our country would be in a much stronger place.

The President. And not to be a tag team here, here's one last thing. Because—I'm sorry, what was your name? Angelica asked a terrific question about what does it mean to be a great teacher. If you hear a candidate say that the big problem with education is teachers, you should not vote for that person. Because I—it is a hard job. And it is the most important job we've got. And folks who go into teaching don't go into it for the money. [*Laughter*] They go into it because they are passionate about kids.

Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't some bad teachers, and it doesn't mean that we shouldn't hold teachers to high standards as well and continue to work in terms of professional development and recruitment and retention of great teachers. And there have been times where Arne and I have had some disagreements with the teachers' unions on certain issues because we want to encourage experimentation. And—but the bottom line, though, is, is that you can measure how good a school is by whether or not it is respecting and engaging teachers in the classroom so that they are professionals and they feel good about what they're doing and they are given freedom and they're not just being forced to teach to a test.

And it is very important for us, then, to make sure that, if what we hear is just a bunch of teacher-bashing—I can't tell you who to vote for, but—at least not right now. Later, I will. [Laughter] But I can tell you who to vote against, and that is somebody who decides that somehow teachers don't deserve the kind of respect that—and decent pay that they deserve.

So all right. Let's see. It's a young lady's turn. Yes, you right there in the brown sweater right there. Okay, go ahead. That's fine.

College Affordability

Q. Thank you. I'm Elena Hicks, and I'm a senior at Roosevelt and an intern at the Hillary Clinton campaign. [Applause.] Woo!

The President. Oh, okay. I guess I know who you're voting for. [Laughter]

Q. Yes. And this was a Sanders question, but I'll make it more general. Do you think it's possible or realistic for there to be free tuition for college in the United States?

The President. Well, I think that it is absolutely realistic for us to, first of all, have the first 2 years of community college free, because it's in my budget, and I know how to pay for it. [Laughter] And it would—and essentially, if you close up some corporate tax loopholes that aren't growing the economy and are just kind of a boondoggle, you take that money, you can then help every State do what Tennessee is already doing. Because Tennessee is already making community colleges free for the first 2 years.

And what that does, then, is, first of all, it helps young people who may not right now want to go get a 4-year college education, but know that they still need some sort of technical training, or they want to get an associate's degree. Right away, that whole group, they now know they can get their education for free as long as they're working hard. But for those who are thinking about a 4-year college education, they can also get their first 2 years at the community college, then transfer those credits to a 4-year college, and they've just cut their overall college costs in half. So it would be good for everybody, whether you're going 2 years or 4 years.

Now, if we can get that done, then I think we can start building from there. In the meantime, I do want to make sure, though, that everybody understands what we were talking about in terms of FAFSA. You have to fill out this form. And we are making it easier for you to do. You have no excuse. Parents who are here, even if you didn't go to college, you need to nag your kids to make sure that this FAFSA form gets filled out so that people know—so that you know the student aid that you may be entitled to.

My grandma, she didn't go to college, she didn't—even though she was probably the smartest person I knew. But she did know that you had to go to college and that you had to fill out this form. So I want everybody here to make sure that you stay focused on that, because there's more help already than a lot of people are aware of. And this College Scorecard that we talked about—collegescorecard.ed.gov—what that does is, is it allows you to take a look at the schools to find out, do they graduate their students, how much debt do they have, are they generally getting a job after they graduate?

So we're not, like, just ranking, here's the most prestigious school; what we're—we're giving you some news you can use here in evaluating whether the schools that you're applying to actually deliver on their commitment. Because a lot of times, the students who get big student loans debt after they graduate, it's because they didn't think through where they should go, what should they be studying, what resources are available. And we want you to, on the

front end, to have as much information as possible in order to make a good choice. Okay? All right.

Arne, anything to add on that?

Secretary Duncan. Very, very quickly, quick test. That FAFSA form the President talked about, how much in grants and loans do we give out each year? Any guesses, at the Federal level?

Audience member. A lot.

Secretary Duncan. How much is a lot?

The President. See, I didn't test you. [Laughter] You notice this. That's the head of the Education Department.

Secretary Duncan. How much? 30,000? Any other thoughts? Yes, sir. What's that? Total, how much? \$30 billion? Any other guesses? All right, so very quickly, we give out \$150 billion in grants and loans each year.

The President. That's real money. [Laughter]

Secretary Duncan. And the President said we've got a long way to go, we want to do more, trying to make community colleges free. But we don't care whether your family has money or don't have money or whether your family has gone to college or not or where you live. If you work hard—\$150 billion. It's the only form—20 minutes, half an hour—the only form you're ever going to fill out in your life that's going to give you access to \$150 billion. So I just want to emphasize this point. You have to fill that out.

The President. Got to fill it out. [Laughter] All right? A'ight. [Laughter] This gentleman back here. I don't want to neglect the folks in the back here.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Q. How are you doing, Mr. President?

The President. How are you, sir?

Q. Good, good. My name is Rudolph Dawson, and I'm a graduate of Fort Valley State University in Georgia. My concern is that the Historically Black schools like Fort Valley State, a lot of the pressure is being put on them in terms of they're not getting the budget they need to continue to educate people like myself. They are not getting the programs that they need to attract students that want the higher pay. And it's to me—what can you do, or what can your administration do, or the next administration do, to right the wrong that's done in the past? And it's continued to be done to these universities. This—Fort Valley State is also a land-grant college, and they haven't been getting all the money they needed for agriculture like the University of Georgia. I'd like to see some changes there.

The President. Okay. The—well, first of all, for those of you—because some of you—we've got a lot of young people here, so just to give you a little bit of history, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities arose at a time when obviously a lot of schools were segregated. And so African American students couldn't attend a lot of the traditional State colleges and universities that had been set up.

And many of them went on to become incredible educational institutions that produced some of our greatest thinkers. So Morehouse College, Howard, Spelman—all across the

country, particularly in the South, a lot of these Historically Black Colleges and Universities were really the nurturer of an African American middle class, many of whom then went on to become the civil rights pioneers that helped to lead to Dr. King and to the civil rights movement and to all the history that I think you're aware of.

A lot of those schools are still doing well. Some of them have gotten smaller and are struggling, partly because of good news—University of Georgia isn't segregated anymore, for example—so it's good that African American students or Latino students have more diverse options. But they still service an important role. And so working with people like Congressman Bobby Scott and others, we've continued to provide some support to those schools.

But one thing that Arne and I have been doing is saying to these Historically Black Colleges and Universities, you've also got to step up your game in terms of graduation rates, because there are some of those schools, just like non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities, who take in a lot of students, but don't always graduate those students. And those students end up being stuck with debt, and it's not a good deal for them.

So we're working together. We've got a whole Task Force and Commission that's just devoted to working with these schools to make sure that they've got the resources they need to continue to perform a really important function, but that they're also stepping up their game so that kids who attend these universities and colleges, they're graduating on time and are able to then pursue the kind of careers that they need.

Anything you want to add on that? All right.

Let's see. It's a—I think it's a young lady's turn now. Oh, you know what, I need to go up top. All right. That young lady in the striped shirt right there. I can barely see, but this is what happens when you get older, young people. [Laughter] First time I came to Iowa, I had no gray hair. [Laughter] I didn't. Look at me now. [Laughter]

Diversity of Viewpoints on College Campuses

Q. Hi, my name is Abba. I'm currently a junior at Lincoln High School here on the South Side of Des Moines. My question to you is, I know you don't want to get involved with the Presidential race at the moment, but a candidate has said that they want to cut Government spending—or to politically biased colleges, and I was wondering if, say, that would hurt the education system for those who depend on that, or would it better the education as a whole?

The President. I—first of all, I didn't hear this candidate say that. I have no idea what that means. [Laughter] I suspect he doesn't either. [Laughter]

Look, the purpose of college is not just, as I said before, to transmit skills. It's also to widen your horizons, to make you a better citizen, to help you to evaluate information, to help you make your way through the world, to help you be more creative. The way to do that is to create a space where a lot of ideas are presented and collide and people are having arguments and people are testing each other's theories, and over time, people learn from each other, because they're getting out of their own narrow point of view and having a broader point of view.

So Arne, I'm sure, has the same experience that I did, which is, when I went to college, suddenly, there were some folks who didn't think at all like me. And if I had an opinion about something, they'd look at me and say, well, that's stupid. And then, they'd describe how they saw the world. And they might have had different sets of politics, or they might have a different view about poverty, or they might have a different perspective on race, and sometimes, their

views would be infuriating to me. But it was because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you and had different backgrounds than you that I then started testing my own assumptions. And sometimes, I changed my mind. Sometimes, I realized, you know what, maybe I've been too narrow-minded. Maybe I didn't take this into account. Maybe I should see this person's perspective.

So that's what college, in part, is all about. The idea that you'd have somebody in Government making a decision about what you should think ahead of time or what you should be taught and if it's not the right thought or idea or perspective or philosophy, that that person would be—that they wouldn't get funding runs contrary to everything we believe about education. I mean, I guess that might work in the Soviet Union—[*laughter*]*—but it doesn't work here. That's not who we are. That's not what we're about.*

Now, one thing I do want to point out is, it's not just sometimes folks who are mad that colleges are too liberal that have a problem. Sometimes, there are folks on college campuses who are liberal and maybe even agree with me on a bunch of issues who sometimes aren't listening to the other side. And that's a problem too.

I was just talking to a friend of mine about this. I've heard of some college campuses where they don't want to have a guest speaker who is too conservative. Or they don't want to read a book if it has language that is offensive to African Americans or somehow sends a demeaning signal towards women. And I've got to tell you, I don't agree with that either. I don't agree that you, when you become students at colleges, have to be coddled and protected from different points of view.

I think that you should be able to—you should invite—anybody should—anybody who comes to speak to you and you disagree with, you should have an argument with them. But you shouldn't silence them by saying, you can't come because my—I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say. That's not the way we learn either.

So what do you think, Arne?

Secretary Duncan. Amen.

The President. He said, amen. [*Laughter*] All right. Okay.

Let's see. I think it's a guy's turn. This gentleman with—this gentleman here in the tie, you had your hand up a couple times. Yes, I didn't want you to feel neglected. You got—you almost gave up, and I wanted to make sure to call on you. Hold on a second. Wait for the mike.

Tax Deductions for Student Loans/Education Funding/Federal Budget

Q. Thank you. My name is James Quinn. This is my wife Tatiana and our daughter Victoria. We've been saving for her college education for 10 years, and over that time, the Federal deductibility of 529 contributions has gone away, even though we can still get that deduction from Iowa income taxes. It would be nice to see a little reward for saving, rather than just making borrowing money get easier.

The President. The—I'm going to let Arne hit this one because he's an expert on our various savings programs.

Secretary Duncan. Yes. I'll just say, as a parent with two kids not quite this age, my wife and I are putting money actively into 529s to try and save. And getting the Federal Government to support that more or encourage that would be fantastic. And again, this is something we have to work with the Congress to do the right thing.

But for families who are saving, we have some families now starting kindergarten and first grade, saving every year, just a little bit, to help their kids to go to college. We need to incentivize that and reward that. It's a great point.

The President. There was a time when the deductibility with student loans was more significant than it is today. Whenever you make something tax-deductible, that means that there's less money going into the Treasury. That, then, means that either somebody has got to pay for it with other taxes or the deficit grows or we spend less on something else.

And this is part of why this argument, this debate that's going on right now in Congress about lifting the sequester is so important. It's a—I—it's a Washington term—I hate the term—but essentially, what Congress did was it said, all right, we're just going to lop off spending at this level for the next decade. The problem is, of course, the population is going up, the economy is growing, and so even though the deficit right now has been cut by two-thirds since I came into office, which is—that's—you wouldn't know that listening to some of the candidates around here, but it has.

If in fact sequester stays in place, not only our ability to spend for education or to help families with student loans, but also things like early childhood education, Head Start programs, Pell grants—all those things can end up being adversely affected.

And this is one thing that I would just ask everybody to consider. When you hear budget debates, I know your eyes kind of glaze over, but the Federal budget, that's really where we express our values. And a lot of times people say, well, we should just cut Government spending because there's all this waste. But in fact, the vast majority of Government spending is for Social Security, it's for Medicare, it's for Medicaid, it's for helping vulnerable populations, and it's for defense. And not a lot is left over for helping middle class families, for example, send their kids to college or to save.

And if you have this ceiling, this artificial cap, without take into account a growing population and more young people going to college, then you end up with a situation in which fewer people are getting help. And that's why it's important for us to lift this artificial cap. And it's also why it's important for us to close some of these tax loopholes that are going to either the very wealthy or to corporations that really don't need them, because they're doing just fine, and they're not having a problem financing their college educations—their kids' college educations.

All right. It's a young lady's turn. All right. I will go—I'm going to go to this young lady because originally I called on her first, and then—but I—we got mixed up. So I didn't—go ahead. What's your name?

The President's College Application Advice/Higher Education

Q. That's all right. My name is Nosa Ali, and I go to Roosevelt High School. Hopefully, my question is not too difficult. And it's what is your best advice for Malia as she goes off to college?

The President. My best advice to Malia. Now, this is assuming that Malia would listen to my advice. [*Laughter*] She's very much like her mother at this point. [*Laughter*] She's got her own mind.

One piece of advice that I've given her is not to stress too much about having to get into one particular college. There are a lot of good colleges and universities out there, and it's important, I think, for everybody here to understand you can find a college or university that

does—gives you a great education, and just because it's not some name-brand, famous, fancy school doesn't mean that you're not going to get a great education there. So one is, lower the stress levels in terms of just having to get into one particular school. I think that's important.

The second piece of advice I have is keep your grades up until you get in, and after that, make sure you pass. [*Laughter*] Because it's important that you kind of run through the tape in your senior year and not start feeling a little slack. I don't worry about that with her; she's a hard worker.

And then, the third thing is really the advice that I already mentioned, which is, be open to new experiences when you go to college. I—don't go to college just to duplicate the same experience you had in high school. Don't make your decision based on, well, where are all my friends going so that I can do the exact same things with the exact same friends that I did in high school. The whole point is for you to push yourself out of your comfort level, meet people you haven't met before, take classes that you hadn't thought of before. Stretch yourself. Because this is the time to do it, when you're young. Seek out new experiences.

Because I think when you do that, you may discover you may think that you wanted to do one thing; it may turn out, you wanted to do—that you wanted to do something completely different, and you have an amazing talent for something completely different, but you just haven't been exposed to it yet. You've got to know what it is that's out there, and that requires you to do some things differently than you've been doing in high school.

So, Arne, anything you wanted to add on that?

Secretary Duncan. Just quickly, particularly for the seniors, please don't apply to one school—sort of what the President said—apply to four, five, six, seven schools. It's amazing to me how many young people just apply to one school. And it might be the best fit for you, but keep your options open. So look at what's out there—close to home, less close to home, whatever it might be—apply to a bunch of places.

And a final thing, just to emphasize, the goal is not to go to college; the goal is to graduate. And so figure out where you're going to go and graduate. And it might take you 3 years, it might take you 4, it might take you 5. But the big thing we need all of you not to just go, not to attend, but to walk across those stages 4 or 5 years from now with that diploma in hand.

The President. Gentleman right here. Here, you can use my mike.

Diversity in Education

Q. All right. [*Laughter*] Thanks, Mr. President. I'm an elementary school principal here in Des Moines Public Schools, and one of the things that we really value is the diversity that we have within our community. And I'm really curious to hear from you and Secretary Duncan the value that you see that diversity brings to a young person's education.

The President. That's a great question. How long have you been—how long you been a principal?

Q. Five years.

The President. Five years?

Q. Five years.

The President. That's outstanding. The—we're getting old, though, man, because I thought he was a student. [*Laughter*] He's the principal. He's not even just a teacher, he's a principal. [*Laughter*] The—well, thank you for the great work you're doing.

To some degree, I've already answered this question. The value of diversity is getting to know and understand people who are different from you, because that's the world you will be living in and working in. And it's actually really interesting, they've been showing through a variety of studies that people who can understand and connect with a wide range of people, that that ends up being as important a skill, if not more important a skill, than just about anything else in terms of your career success, whatever the field.

It also, by the way, is part of what makes our democracy work. I was having a discussion about this earlier today. Our democracy is premised on an assumption that even if somebody is not just like me, that they're a good person and a generous person and that we have things in common and that we can work things out and if we have a disagreement, then we can have an argument based on facts and evidence. And I might sometimes lose the argument, and I don't persuade as many people, and then, that's how voting works, and majorities are formed, and they change. That's how our democracy is supposed to work.

And I think that starts early. Because when you've got diversity in schools, then you're less likely as an adult to start thinking, well, that person, they're not like me, or those persons, they don't have the same values, or they don't care as much about their kids, or—and then democracy starts breaking down, because then everything is a fight to the death because there's no sense that we can actually bridge our differences and disagree without being disagreeable and find common ground.

So it's not only good for your career, but it's also good for our country. The same goes—the same holds true, by the way, as part of diversity—studies show that organizations that have women in decisionmaking positions function better than those who don't. And so—[*applause*—seriously, the—that if you look at corporate boards, actually you can correlate their performance with the number of women that they've got on those boards. So it also is valuable for us to make sure that not only is there diversity, but that in leadership positions, different voices are heard.

So, Arne, anything you want to add to that?

Good. So keep it up. [*Laughter*]

Young lady right there. Yes, you. Right there. Well, oh, I'm sorry, but I'll call on you first, and then I'll get back to you. I'm sorry. The mike is already there. I promise you'll be the next.

Arts Education

Q. Right here? Hello. Okay. It works. [*Laughter*] Hi. My name is Ja Dicela. I'm a junior here at North High School. And actually, I have, like, two questions. One is one for my friend. He's very shy; he can't speak up.

The President. [*Laughter.*]

Q. We are part of a group called Upward Bound, and we work through Simpson College.

The President. Yes.

Q. There's been stories of our budget being cut, and we want to know what the Government can—help us and work with us for that.

And my other question is, in your professional opinion, how much is visual arts an importance to our school, and how are you going to save it?

The President. Okay. Why don't I—I'll take the first—I'll take the question on visual arts, you talk about Upward Bound. The—Arne, go ahead.

Secretary Duncan. Just very quickly, it really goes back to what the President talked about. It's not just Upward Bound that's at risk; it's Pell grants that are at risk, early childhood education. Folks in Congress want to zero that out of the budget. And I think it's so important that all of us as students and as educators to not pit this program against the other, but to hold folks in Washington accountable for investing in education.

As the President said, we want to make sure we're getting results. It's not blindly investing. But there are lots of things in our budget, Upward Bound being a piece of it, that honestly are in pretty significant danger right now. And the President is fighting very hard. We have some folks backing us, but there are others that just sort of see these things as somehow extras. And I think it's so important that as young people, as voters, as family, your voices be heard.

He cannot by himself prevent these cuts. That's not how our democracy works. And so we'll do—we'll hold us accountable. We'll continue to push very, very hard. That's why we're out traveling the country all the time. But we need voters' voices being heard, saying, we need Upward Bound programs, we need TRIO, we need early childhood, we need afterschool programs, we need the arts. And you can talk about the arts as well.

The President. Well, look, the—I mean, the arts are what make life worthwhile, right? It's—you need food and shelter and all that good stuff, but the things that make you laugh, cry, connect, love, so much of that is communicated through the arts.

And I don't want our young people to think that the arts are just something that you sit there passively and watch on a TV screen. I want everybody, even if you're not a great artist, to have the experience of making art and have the experience of making music. Because that's part of what makes for a well-rounded education.

We also know that young people learn better if they're not just looking at a textbook and multiple-test quizzes all day long and that it breaks up the monotony and it gives expression to different sides of themselves, that that's good for the overall educational experience.

So I think visual arts, music, it's all important. And we should not be depriving young people of those experiences. And they're not extras. They're central to who we are. The—we are—part of what makes us human is our ability to make art, to represent what's inside of us in ways that surprise and delight people. And I don't want us to start thinking that that's somehow something we can just push aside.

Now, I want you to be able to read and be able to do your algebra too. But I don't know why it—where we got this idea we've got to choose between those two things. We've got to be able to do them all. And it used to be standard practice. And there was no debate, even in the smallest town in a poorer community or a rural community. There was always the art teacher and the math teacher—or the art teacher and the music teacher, and nobody assumed somehow that that was an extra. That was part of it, just like having a sports program was part of it. And that's part of what a well-rounded education is all about.

But it does cost some money. And that's something that I want to emphasize: that you can't do all this stuff on the cheap all the time.

So how many more questions? How much more time we got? Only one? I'm going to take two. [Laughter] The—all right. I'm going to get to you—don't worry—because I promised I was going to—I'll tell you, it's a guy's turn. This guy right there. All right.

Q. All right. Okay. [Laughter.] I've got two short questions.

The President. What's your name?

Education Reform

Q. My name is Marcus Carter, and I'm a senior. And out of all the schools in Iowa, why did you come here? And after this, can I get a picture with you? [Laughter]

The President. Now, Marcus, I'm going to answer your first question. Second question, though, if I start taking a picture with you—look at this crowd right here. [Laughter] I'd—we'd be taking a lot of selfies. So I'm imposing the no-selfie rule, although I'll definitely try to shake as many hands as possible.

We came here because some really good work is being done here. And I think that your teachers, your principal, the superintendent deserve credit for the improvements that have been made. And I want Arne to address this, because Arne travels to schools all across the country. And sometimes, we get so focused on what's not working that we forget to lift up what is working. And when a school is doing a good job, I'm sure the principal and superintendent—the teachers here feel like they want to do even more and do even better. And—but when we've made progress, we've got to acknowledge that, because that makes us feel encouraged and hopeful that we can continue to make even more strides.

So, Arne.

Secretary Duncan. I'll just say a couple quick things. And it's not a coincidence that we're here, but this is a school that historically struggled, had some hard times. And new leadership, new expectations—the President talked about technology here, talked a much better sense of culture, different ways of discipline. But the thing I always go back to is—I don't know if my numbers are exact—I think a couple years ago you had 2 AP classes, and now you have 15. And to go from 2 to 15 is a really big deal.

But what I always say is the students here aren't seven times as smart as 4 years ago; it's just higher expectations, a different sense of belief among adults about what's possible. And so we try and highlight places that haven't always been successful but are trying to do the right thing and move in the right direction.

As the President said, no one is satisfied. You guys are still hungry, you're still trying to get better. But that's real progress. That's adults saying, kids, students, young people deserve the opportunity to take college classes in high school, deserve to go to a safe school, deserve the technology. I think there are lots of lessons other schools could learn from the progress you're making here at North High School.

The President. All right. I promised I was going to call on this young lady last. Go ahead.

Q. Okay.

The President. What's your name?

Federal Student Loan Programs/Immigration Reform

Q. Okay. My name is Tania Montoya from North High School. And my question is, if you legalize college—or free 2-year college, is everyone, including illegal students with a good GPA, able to get this benefit?

The President. Well, the—right now the way—no, this is an important question, and I know this is a debate that's been taking place among some of the Presidential candidates. Right now the way that the Federal student loan programs work is that undocumented students are not eligible for these loan programs. That's how the law is currently. And it is my view—well, two things I want to say.

First, if you fall in that category, you should still fill out the FAFSA, because it may be that States or universities or colleges may have private scholarships or other mechanisms. So it doesn't automatically mean that you may not qualify for some benefits. So it's still important for you to kind of—because that's a standard form that's used by everybody.

But this raises the broader question that I've been talking about now for a couple of years, and that is that for young people who came here, their parents may have brought them here and they now are Americans, kids by every other criteria except for a piece of paper—they may be your classmates, they may be your friends, they may be your neighbors—the notion that somehow we would not welcome their desire to be full-fledged parts of this community and this country and to contribute and to serve makes absolutely no sense.

And this whole anti-immigrant sentiment that's out there in our politics right now is contrary to who we are. The—because unless you are a Native American, your family came from someplace else. And although we are a nation of laws and we want people to follow the law, and we have been working—and I've been pushing Congress—to make sure that we have strong borders and we are keeping everybody moving through legal processes, don't pretend that somehow a hundred years ago the immigration process was all smooth and strict and—*[laughter]*—that's not how it worked.

There are a whole bunch of folks who came here from all over Europe and all throughout Asia and all throughout Central America and all—and certainly who came from Africa, who it wasn't some orderly process that—where all the rules applied and everything was strict, and I came the right way. That's not how it worked.

So the notion that now, suddenly, that one generation or two generations, or even four or five generations removed, that suddenly we are treating new immigrants as if they're the problem, when your grandparents were treated like the problem or your great-grandparents were treated like the problem or were considered somehow unworthy or uneducated or unwashed—no. That's not who we are. It's not who we are.

We can have a legitimate debate about how to set up an immigration system that is fair and orderly and lawful. And I think the people who came here illegally should have the consequences of paying a fine and getting registered and all kinds of steps that they should have to take in order to get right with the law. But when I hear folks talking as if somehow these kids are different from my kids or less worthy in the eyes of God, that somehow they are less worthy of our respect and consideration and care, I think that's un-American. I do not believe that. I think it is wrong. And I think we should do better. Because that's how America was made, by us caring about all our kids.

Thank you, everybody. I love you guys.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:06 p.m. in the auditorium. In his remarks, he referred to Russhaun Johnson, student body president, Chad Ryan, basketball coach, and Kimber L. Foshe, counselor, North High School; and 2016 Republican Presidential candidate Benjamin S. Carson, Sr. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng. Secretary Duncan referred to Rashawn Lovejoy, mother of Russhaun Johnson. He also referred to his wife Karen Duncan and their children Ryan and Claire. A participant referred to former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sen. Bernard Sanders, in their capacity as 2016 Democratic Presidential candidates.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : North High School in Des Moines, IA, town hall meeting and question-and-answer session.

Locations: Des Moines, IA.

Names: Ahart, Thomas; Carson, Benjamin S., Sr.; Cownie, T.M. Franklin; Duncan, Arne; Fitzgerald, Michael L.; Foshe, Kimber L.; Greene, Neico R.; Johnson, Russhaun; Miller, Thomas; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Ryan, Chad; Scott, Robert C.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Vukovich, Michael.

Subjects: Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Economy, national : Improvement; Education : Art and music programs; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Education : Postsecondary education :: Scholarship and financial aid forms, simplification; Education : Standards and school accountability; Education : Teachers; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Education, Department of : College Scorecard; Education, Department of : Secretary; Elections : 2016 Presidential and congressional elections; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Iowa : North High School in Des Moines; Iowa : President's visit.

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