

The President's Weekly Address

March 14, 2015

Hi, everybody. Earlier this week, I visited with students at Georgia Tech to talk about the importance of higher education in the new economy and how we can make it more affordable.

In an economy increasingly built on innovation, the most important skill you can sell is your knowledge. That's why higher education is, more than ever, the surest ticket to the middle class. But just when it's never been more important, it's also never been more expensive. The average undergrad who borrows to pay for college ends up graduating with about \$28,000 in student loan debt.

That's why my administration has worked hard to make college more affordable. We expanded tax credits and Pell grants, enacted the largest reform to student loan programs in history, and fought to keep interest rates on student loans low. We've acted to let millions of graduates cap loan payments at 10 percent of their income so they don't have to choose between paying the rent and paying back their debt. I've sent Congress my plan to bring the cost of community college down to zero, because 2 years of higher education should be as free and universal as high school is today.

But all of us—elected officials, universities, business leaders—everybody needs to do more to bring down college costs. Which is why this week, I unveiled another way that we can help more Americans afford college. It doesn't involve any new spending or bureaucracy. It's a simple declaration of values, what I call a Student Aid Bill of Rights. It says that every student deserves access to a quality, affordable education; every student should be able to access the resources to pay for college; every bor-

rower has the right to an affordable repayment plan; and every borrower has the right to quality customer service, reliable information, and fair treatment, even if they struggle to repay their loans.

That's it, just a few simple principles. But if we all rally around these principles, there's a lot that colleges, lenders, and the people you sent to Washington and to your State legislatures can do to realize them across the country.

So if you believe in a Student Aid Bill of Rights that will help more Americans pay for a quality education, I'm asking you to visit whitehouse.gov/collegeopportunity. Sign your name to this declaration. Tell your families and your friends and fellow students. I'm going to ask Members of Congress and lenders and as many business leaders as I can find. Because making sure that students aren't saddled with debt before they even get started in life is in all our interests.

In America, a higher education cannot be a privilege reserved for only the few. It has to be available to everybody who's willing to work for it.

Thanks, and have a great weekend.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 1:20 p.m. on March 12 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast on March 14. In the address, the President referred to the memorandum on a Student Aid Bill of Rights to help ensure affordable loan repayment, which was signed on March 10 and is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 13, but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on March 14.

Remarks Following a Meeting With the Council of the Great City Schools

March 16, 2015

Okay, well, I want to thank the Council of the Great City Schools. This is an organization that represents superintendents and board

members and educators from some of the largest school districts in the country. And we just had a terrific conversation about some of the

extraordinary progress that's being made at the local levels.

The good news is that we are seeing, as a consequence of some of the reforms that we've initiated and partnered with at the State and local levels—we're seeing improved reading scores, improved math scores, improved graduation rates. We're seeing improvement in some of the previously lowest performing schools.

And this organization, I think, has taken on the challenge and has been able to begin a process of turning school districts around and making sure that young people are getting the kind of education that they need to be able to compete in the 21st century. That's the good news.

The challenge that we face is that this is a monumental task, and it requires resources. And I'm very proud of what we've been able to do in terms of helping schools to initiate improvements in how they train teachers, in how they engage kids in the classroom, in how they start moving education around math and science and technology, how they reach populations that are particularly difficult to reach, how they're bringing new technology into the classroom. But all that is dependent on a budget and an approach at the Federal level that says we care about all kids and not just some.

Now, the Republican House and Senate are about to put forward their budget. My hope is that their budget reflects the priorities of educating every child. But I can tell you that if the budget maintains sequester-level funding, then we would actually be spending less on pre-K to 12th grade in America's schools in terms of Federal support than we were back in 2000. And that's adjusting for inflation. The notion that we would be going backwards instead of forwards in how we're devoting resources to educating our kids makes absolutely no sense.

In addition, we've got a major debate obviously taking place about the reauthorization of the major education act that shapes Federal policy towards our schools. There is, I think, some useful conversations taking place between the chairman of the relevant committee, Lamar Alexander, and Patty Murray. But

there's some core principles that all the leaders here believe in. Making sure that we continue to provide resources to the poorest school districts and not creating a situation where we can suddenly shift dollars from wealthy districts—or from poorer districts to wealthy districts, or alternatively, that education aid suddenly can start going to sport stadiums or tax cuts at the State level. That's something that these school districts feel very strongly about.

Making sure that we continue to focus on low-performing schools and that they are getting additional resources. Making sure that we are continuing to assess in a smart way, on an annual basis, how young people are performing, and that we're disaggregating so that we can see in various subgroups how young people are performing to make sure they're on track. That's something that people here care very much about.

Making sure that we've got high standards and high expectations for all our kids, and making sure that we are providing the resources to teachers and principals to meet those high standards. That's going to be important.

Making sure that we are investing in special education and English learning for large portions of our student population that may need extra help. That's going to be critically important.

So there are a set of principles that are reflected in my budget and I hope will be reflected in the Republican budget. But if it is not, then we're going to have to have a major debate. We are making too much progress now in terms of graduation rates, improved reading scores, improved math scores, increasing standards, increasing access to the resources the kids need for us to be going backwards now. And this is something worth fighting for.

So I am very grateful for all the folks here for the work they're doing. I hope that people will get familiar with some of the stories of progress that have been made. If you look at what's happened in the DC public schools, or you look at the efforts that are being made in places like Fresno, which—it's a poor city in a poor school district, but despite that is seeing real strides. You look at what's going on in

Cleveland, where I'll be visiting tomorrow [Wednesday].^o These are school districts that, despite enormous challenges, have made real progress.

And the idea that we'd go backwards on that progress, in some cases for ideological reasons, as opposed to because of what the evidence says, that's something that—that's not the kind of legacy we want to leave for the next genera-

tion. And I'm going to continue to fight to make sure that this progress continues.

So I want to thank everybody who's around this table and know that they're going to have a strong partner in my administration.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:51 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland March 17, 2015

President Obama. Well, it is a great pleasure to once again welcome my good friend and colleague, the Taoiseach, Prime Minister Kenny, back to the White House and the Oval Office along with his outstanding delegation.

This is an annual affair and always one of my favorites. It allows me to trot out my Irish heritage—[laughter]—and brings back incredibly fond memories of my visits to Ireland, and it allows us to reaffirm the incredible friendship and family ties between our two countries. The Taoiseach visits at a time when Ireland is on the move after a very challenging financial crisis and economic recession. Under the Taoiseach's leadership, finances have stabilized, the economy is now growing again, unemployment's beginning to come down, and there are terrific opportunities for us to further collaborate in creating jobs both in the United States and in Ireland.

One of those areas is the potential for a Transatlantic Trade Partnership between the United States and the European Union. And we had discussions about how we can continue the negotiations on those fronts. And I was able to hear from the Taoiseach about Europe's progress in trying to strengthen its economy as a whole, because obviously, what happens in Europe, as one of our largest trading partners, has a great impact on what happens here in the United States as well.

We had the opportunity to talk about Northern Ireland, and although the recent frame-

work agreement that has been put in place offers great hope for a resolution of some longstanding challenges there, there is still more work to do. But we very much appreciate the leadership that the Taoiseach has shown in this process and the collaboration with the United States in encouraging both parties to arrive at peaceful resolutions that can lead to more prosperity and growth in Northern Ireland.

We had an opportunity to talk about some of the domestic issues here. Of great interest to the Taoiseach is immigration reform. I indicated to him the executive actions that I've taken, some of which are currently tied up in the courts. And we share the view that one of the great strengths of the United States has always been its willingness to welcome new immigrants to our shores. That's what's made us unique and special. And nobody has contributed more to the growth and dynamism of the U.S. economy than our Irish immigrants, and that continues to be the case. So we appreciate the interest there.

And we had a chance to discuss some of the broader security issues that we face in common: the importance of having a firm and resolute position with respect to Ukraine and Russian aggression there, and the need to maintain strong sanctions and ensure that the Minsk agreement is fully implemented and that the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine is respected. We had a chance to discuss the challenges in the Middle East and the impor-

^o White House correction.