

resulting in \$139 billion in new profits over the next 8 years for the pharmaceutical industries and continual struggles for our seniors who literally are choosing between food and medicine.

When President Bush took office, the number of uninsured Americans had actually decreased for 2 straight years. The number of uninsured Americans had actually gone down for 2 straight years. But the dramatic increase in premiums during the Bush administration, combined with the loss of so many jobs, has left 3.8 million more Americans without health insurance. There are now nearly 44 million uninsured Americans, and the consequences are dire for these families and, I would argue, for communities and for businesses as well that end up seeing their health care premium dollars go up every time someone walks into the emergency room sicker than they should be, receiving inappropriate care and having the community hospital have to absorb and transfer that to the folks with insurance.

People without health insurance do not receive the care they need, as I indicated, to prevent or detect or treat serious medical problems. As a result, they are forced to live their lives in poorer health and die younger. Approximately 18,000 people die prematurely each year because they do not have health insurance.

We are the greatest country in the world. Shame on us if we cannot fix this. And we can fix it. It is just a matter of will. It is a matter of values and priorities. We need to turn things around and get this right.

So we come back again to President Reagan's famous question: Are you better off than you were 4 years ago? What has happened in the last 4 years? Again, wages have been flat, if not going down. In my State many folks are losing their jobs, and wages that are being replaced are actually lower. Gas prices are skyrocketing out of sight. College tuition, access to college and the American dream that we all want for our children, has gone up tremendously. Health care costs have skyrocketed, as I mentioned. As a result, our middle-income families are feeling squeezed more and more every day, and Americans are not better off. But we can be better off. We are the United States of America. We are the can-do country, and I know we can get back on track. With a few changes, with the right priorities, with the right values, we can turn this around. We have done it before and we can do it again.

With strong leadership and a real commitment to confronting the problems that families face, we can do better. We can provide our schools and teachers with the support they deserve. We can ensure that every qualified student has the opportunity to attend college. We can build a stronger America so every worker has access to health care and our seniors and the disabled truly have access to their prescription

drugs that they need at the lowest possible prices. We can restore the confidence of Americans that our better days are still ahead.

We have much to do. All of these facts, all of these issues, relate to choices, the choices we make as we govern about who we want to make sure is doing better in this country. We can choose between focusing on those things that help Americans, help the public to do better, or the special interests of this country. We need to turn it around so we are putting people first and we are addressing those things that allow each of us to have the opportunity for the great American dream. We are all about working hard, playing by the rules, and being able to go as far as one can possibly go in this great country if they are willing to do the work.

Too many folks are working hard and finding themselves more and more with costs and burdens that are stopping them from being able to fully obtain the American dream for themselves and their families. We are not better off right now, but we can be, and I am hopeful with the right kind of changes that we will be.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

STATE OF EDUCATION

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I thank my colleague from Michigan for her excellent statement. I rise today to talk about the state of education in America today, and I want to pose a simple question, as my colleague from Michigan did: Are we better off than we were 4 years ago?

Let us look at the facts. Four years ago, we were making record investments in education. We were giving students, parents, and teachers the tools they needed to succeed. We focused on results and we got them. We focused on our classrooms and improved them. We focused on our students and we helped them on a path to lifetime learning.

Today, we find ourselves in very different circumstances. Today, the focus is on process, not on results. Today, the focus is on centralizing authority instead of the classroom. Instead of focusing on our students, the current administration is simply passing the buck.

During the Clinton administration, we focused on improving the economy and giving every American the tools they needed to succeed. We recorded the longest uninterrupted growth period in our Nation's history, and we helped the American people by getting the education, training, skills, and experience they needed to compete in a global economy. We created 26 million American jobs.

Today, it is a very different story. We are facing dismal budgets, unfunded mandates for our schools, and constant attacks on the programs that disadvantaged families rely on. Instead of help-

ing students, the administration has broken promises and failed to pay the Federal share for education. Let us start by looking at how this administration has underfunded the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

We have seen programs that help students turn into unfunded mandates that burden our States. Over the past 4 years, States spent \$72 billion to cover the unfunded mandates in IDEA and No Child Left Behind. In my home State of Washington, IDEA is underfunded by \$746 million. No Child Left Behind is underfunded by \$408 million. That makes a difference in every classroom and in every child's life.

Two years ago, when we passed the No Child Left Behind Act, I voted for it. Most of us in Congress agreed that accountability is important and that we need to make sure our kids are learning the things they need to succeed, like reading, math, writing, and science. But the No Child Left Behind Act said in exchange for that new accountability, schools would get the funding they needed. Today the accountability has been imposed but the funding has not. In fact, Federal funding for the No Child Left Behind Act has fallen \$32 billion below the authorized levels since this act was signed into law.

I have visited schools in every corner of Washington State and I know firsthand that educators are working harder than ever to help their students meet these new accountability requirements. But today, as we all know, our State and local budgets are stretched so thin our local communities cannot afford to make up the differences between what our schools were promised and what this administration's budget proposal actually provides.

This year, the President's budget fell \$9.4 billion short of fully funding this law. President Bush has proposed the smallest increase for education funding in 9 years and he even proposed eliminating commonsense initiatives like dropout prevention. In Washington State alone, the difference between the President's request and the promise of No Child Left Behind means nearly 28,000 low-income students will be left behind. That number skyrockets to 4.6 million nationwide.

We can do better. That is why in fact I offered an amendment to the Senate budget resolution to fully fund that act. Regrettably my amendment failed on party-line votes.

When we passed the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress and the administration sidestepped the issues affecting our high schools. Our national high school graduation rate is an abysmal 69 percent. That number is even worse for students of color. Do you know roughly half of our minority students are graduating from high school? That means nearly half are dropping out. We need to keep better track of how minority students are doing by tracking dropout rates carefully. But today this Department of Education is not requiring

disaggregation of data on dropouts. That would make it much harder for us to help vulnerable students or even to discover which students need help. With the right policies we can reduce the dropout rate. In fact, that is why last summer I introduced S. 1554, the Pathways for All Students to Succeed, or the PASS Act. This bill will reduce dropouts and help us close that achievement gap.

My bill, the PASS Act, does three things. First of all, it will help students to learn to read and write by providing \$1 billion to help our schools hire literacy coaches. Second, my bill ensures our students are taking the classes and getting the support they need to finish high school, and it provides \$2 billion for academic and career counselors to ensure all of our students have a personalized plan for completing high school and then going on to college.

Finally, my bill provides extra help to schools that need it the most by providing \$500 million in grants to help improve our low-performing schools.

I hope the Senate will pass the bill this year. These are critical steps we could be taking if this Congress were to finally focus on improving the lives of our students.

Let me turn to the Federal role in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Nearly 30 years ago, the Federal Government made a commitment of equal opportunity to our Nation's children with disabilities. With that commitment, again we gave the promise the Federal Government would pay 40 percent of the average per-student cost for every special education student. Today, however, the Federal Government is paying less than 19 percent of the costs. Over the past 4 years of fiscal crisis, Federal funding has fallen \$40 billion short of that 40-percent promise. This hole in special education funding not only hurts our disabled students, it also hurts all of their classmates because in order to make up for Federal funding shortfalls, many districts have been forced to take money from their general education budgets and that affects all students.

Over the past couple of years, IDEA has received increases in Federal funding levels. However, according to the Congressional Research Service, at increases of \$1 billion each year the Federal Government will never fulfill the promise of funding at 40 percent. And even if increases were \$1 billion plus inflation, we would not reach the promised level of 40 percent until 2035. That is another 30 years from now.

Last week the Senate passed a reauthorized version of IDEA. Yet, despite clear support, the Senate did not pass an amendment by Senators HAGEL and HARKIN to fully fund IDEA through mandatory funding.

Education must be a priority for our country if we want a stable economy and a brighter future. We need to focus not only on funding Federal mandates but on access to quality early child-

hood education and postsecondary education.

This year, Congress is working on reauthorizing the Head Start law. I can tell you as a former preschool teacher, I know firsthand how these critical first early years are for our children's future learning, yet this year the President's budget barely allows Head Start to keep up with inflation. That amount is not nearly enough, especially in a year where we are examining new requirements for this program. Without a substantial increase in funding, these programs will have to shut the door to needy at-risk children who will then fall further behind before they even reach kindergarten.

What troubles me more is this President's clear intention is to end this critical program. We all know proposals to block grant programs will eventually lead to decreased funding for the program. Block granting Head Start is not only supported and pushed by the President but also by the House of Representatives. I know I will continue fighting to protect this very critical Head Start Program that has made such a huge difference in the lives of millions of low-income children.

Public education is the bedrock of our democracy. It helps create good, active citizens and it gives our families the tools they need to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. It also ensures each generation of Americans will have more opportunities than their parents and their grandparents did. There is so much at stake in making sure we are moving education forward for all of America's students.

I turn back to the question I posed at the start of my remarks. Are we better off than we were 4 years ago? Sadly, the answer is no. Our students deserve better. Our country deserves better. I am going to keep fighting here in the Senate to ensure that all of America's children get a good education.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois.

PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Washington for her statement relative to education. I believe the theme, the question she has led off with, is one we will be returning to over and over again.

I know how much the Presiding Officer respects Ronald Reagan and how much he looks back on his Presidency and even candidacy as defining moments in the history of our Nation. President Reagan, despite my differences with him politically, had a way of saying things very directly. He was one of the best communicators we have ever had in the White House. He could, in a few words, convey a message so directly and so simply.

This statement of candidate Reagan is one that is a hallmark now of American politics. Not a campaign goes by that someone doesn't say:

Well, as Ronald Reagan once said, "Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?"

It is a very simple question. It is a question that must be asked each time the American people face an important election, and this may be one of the most important in history.

What we hear back from the American people when we ask this question is a resounding no. They say in overwhelming numbers, America is going in the wrong direction. We need a new direction in this country. We need a strong leadership that not only protects America but also creates opportunity in America. You have heard repeatedly from my colleague from Michigan how this has a direct impact when it comes to the health care costs of families; how it has a direct impact—the Senator from Washington made this point—when it comes to educational costs. I think honestly what they have said is demonstrated by a few charts I have here.

This is one that I think tells the whole story about the last 4 years of the Bush administration. During this period of time, average weekly earnings for families have gone up 1 percent. President Bush can point to the fact that over 4 years, average income for Americans has barely increased. But what has happened to the expenses faced by Americans in the same period of time? The cost of gasoline, up 25 percent. My friend, Senator WYDEN of Oregon, will address that, as he has time and again on the floor of the Senate in the next part of this morning business time.

Look at the cost of college tuition. It has gone up 28 percent in the 4 years President Bush has been in office; the cost of family health care premiums; some 36 percent.

Now we will take a closer look at the family health care premiums as an illustration. When the President took office, the average health care premium paid on an annual basis was \$6,348. Now look at the number: \$9,068. The President can send out a check for \$100, \$200, or \$300 and say to middle America: Here is your tax cut; go out and go crazy. Then take a look at this and say: Wait a minute, that tax cut just disappeared. More and more workers and families are paying more and more for health care premiums.

Take a look at this chart. Who really is better off? The average weekly earnings show no increase over the same period of time.

Look at the HMO profits. The profits of the health insurance companies have gone up 50 percent in terms of growth. The CEO compensation for the people who run the HMOs and other corporations is up 61 percent.

Working families, struggling to get by, have seen little or no increase in their income, while those who are profiting from HMOs and from other corporations are doing quite well, thank you.

I remember when Warren Buffett came to say hello to us. He is one of