

should be deeply concerned by this discouraging trend, we should also recognize where progress is being made.

On January 8, the people of Sri Lanka stunned a repressive government that had been rapidly centralizing power and dismantling democratic institutions. President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who sensed his increasing unpopularity, called a snap election 2 years early hoping to take advantage of his fragmented opposition. However, to his surprise and the surprise of many observers, a broad coalition of Sri Lankans voted to oust his administration and to chart a new course. Rather than balk at forfeiting the chance for an unprecedented third term, President Rajapaksa, under pressure from the international community, stepped down within hours of the election results being published.

This was welcome news. After suffering decades of on-and-off conflict that is estimated to have cost as many as 100,000 lives, only to have the violence replaced by increasing repression and political and ethnic polarization, the peaceful transfer of power has helped breathe life into the hopes of Sri Lankans for reconciliation and a better future. For that hope to become reality, newly elected President Maithripala Sirisena will need to gain the trust of all Sri Lankans, regardless of their ethnicity or political views. In too many countries democracy has been treated as an election rather than a way of governing, but for it to succeed all citizens must have the ability to participate meaningfully. As President Sirisena stated in his inaugural address, what Sri Lanka needs “is not a King, but a real human being”.

Of course, democracy alone will not heal Sri Lankan society. No one knows this better than those who lost family, friends, and loved ones in the war with the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers. In the final months of that war, many thousands of civilians died, mostly as a result of shelling by the Sri Lankan military of civilians who had been uprooted by the fighting. The United Nations, the United States, other governments and human rights organizations have long called for thorough, independent investigations and punishment of those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While President Sirisena has pledged to launch a domestic inquiry into alleged war crimes, I agree with those who insist that nothing less than an international investigation, as called for by the U.N. Human Rights Council, will likely suffice to overcome the suspicion and distrust concerning this issue. It would be far better if the government seeks the assistance of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in developing a credible plan for investigating violations of human rights by both sides in the conflict, and holding those responsible accountable.

I am encouraged that President Sirisena has pledged to return the country to a parliamentary democracy

with independent police and judicial institutions, and inclusive governance. He has also committed to taking steps to address the cases of those detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, PTA, many of whom are political prisoners like Jeyakumari Balendran. The reviews should be carried out expeditiously. While the release of 572 prisoners at the time of Pope Francis's visit on January 14 was a positive step, it is the cases of political prisoners detained under the PTA that will demonstrate the Sirisena government's commitment to reconciliation. The sooner innocent victims of the Rajapaksa government's repression are freed, the faster Sri Lanka will be able to recover.

Over the years I have spoken in this Chamber in support of independent investigations of war crimes and justice and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. I have met the relatives of victims of the war. President Sirisena's election offers the chance for all Sri Lankans to finally recover from that tragic period by rebuilding their country in a spirit of tolerance, respect, and common purpose.

#### FIXING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: INNOVATION TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my remarks at the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing yesterday be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

##### FIXING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: INNOVATION TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

This is the 27th hearing in the last six years about fixing No Child Left Behind or a related elementary and secondary education issue. I hope we are not far from a conclusion—from moving from hearings and discussions to marking up a bill. From the beginning of our work on No Child Left Behind, we concluded it would be better, rather than start from scratch on a new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to identify the problems in the law and try to fix them. Generally speaking, we agree on the problems, and on several solutions we are not far from reaching consensus. We still have some work to do on accountability. And by accountability, I mean goals, standards, annual tests, disaggregated reporting of test results, and defining success or failure for teachers and schools as well as the consequences of that success or failure. On some of these things, we pretty much agree, like the need for a new goal. On other things, we still have some work to do, like whether or not to keep the 17 annual federal standardized tests.

This morning we are holding a roundtable discussion on “Fixing No Child Left Behind: Innovation to Better Meet the Needs of Students.” We aim for this to be different than a hearing. Senator Murray and I will each have a short opening statement and then we will introduce our roundtable of participants. Then we're going to jump right into the conversation, posing two questions to help guide the discussion.

First, what is your state, district, or school doing to implement innovative ap-

proaches to improve academic outcomes for students, particularly low-income and at-risk students? Second, how can we improve the federal law to encourage more states, districts, and schools to innovate?

And when I say law, I should also draw attention to the regulations that have followed these laws. For example, every state has to submit a plan to the federal government to receive its share of the \$14.5 billion Title I program distributed to states for low-income children. That's about \$1,300 for every child who lives at or below the federal poverty line. Those Title I applications are reviewed by the Department of Education, as well as by outside experts, before you can spend a dime of that money. In addition, 42 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are operating under waivers from the out-of-date and unworkable regulations in No Child Left Behind. To receive those waivers, states have to submit waiver applications. In Tennessee, that waiver application was 91 pages long with more than 170 pages of attachments. Since 2012, the state has had to submit eight different updates or amendments to the plan.

In addition to all this, the U.S. Department of Education spends another \$9–10 billion or so on about 90 different programs that are either authorized or funded under No Child Left Behind, with separate application and program requirements. These programs include Promise Neighborhoods and Investing in Innovation.

So are we spending this money in a way that makes it easier or harder for you to innovate and achieve better academic outcomes?

My own view is that the government ought to be an enabler and encourager, rather than a mandater, of innovation. It can do this well. For example, last year Congress overwhelmingly supported reauthorizing the Child Care and Development Block Grant program that gives grants to states that allow parents to receive a voucher for the child care of their choice so they can attend school or go to work.

Seven decades ago the G.I. Bill enabled World War II veterans to attend a college of their choice, helping them become the greatest generation. Today, half our college students have federal grants or loans that follow them to the colleges of their choice, enabling them to buy the surest ticket to a better life and job. About 98 percent of the federal dollars that go to higher education follow the student to the school they attend. In K–12, the only money that follows students to the school they attend is the school lunch program.

Now, I'll turn to Ranking Member Murray for her opening statement and then we'll get the conversation going.

#### SCHOOL CHOICE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my remarks at the Brookings Institution earlier today be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

##### SCHOOL CHOICE

I am delighted to be here, but I should warn you: Based on my track record, I'm probably not your most reliable observer on school choice.

If I take you back to September 1992, I gave a speech at Ashland University in Ohio, and I predicted that by the year 2000 “school choice will not be an issue.”

I suggested that an Ashland student writing a thesis in 2000 ought to make the subject parental choice of schools, because by then, I said, “It will be a matter of history.

"Your colleagues will wonder along with you as you examine this strange era when we granted government monopolies control of the most valuable and important enterprises in town, and so many people fought furiously to keep doors to many of the best schools closed to poor children.

"They will ask, how could this have ever happened in America, at a time when the ideas of freedom, choice and opportunity were sweeping the rest of the world?"

My prediction might not have been right, but not because we didn't try.

In 1984, I gave a speech at the University of the South outlining the "deep ruts" into which American K-12 education had fallen. One of those was the lack of school choice for parents.

In 1985, the National Governors Association (NGA) embarked on a project called "Time for Results." We divided into seven task forces, each chaired by a governor, to ask seven of the toughest questions you could ask about American education. One of those questions was, "Why not let parents choose the schools their children attend?" The task force working on that question was chaired by the Democratic governor of Colorado, Richard Lamm, who said then, "You know, it is interesting that America is a land of choices. We have 100 breakfast cereals to choose from, 200 different makes of cars. But in this one educational area . . . we have not done a lot in choice."

Then in 1992, President Bush proposed his "GI Bill for Children," which was a plan to allow states and cities to give \$1,000 annual scholarships in new federal dollars to each child of a middle- and low-income family in a participating state or locality.

Families could spend the scholarships at any lawfully operated school—public, private or religious.

And up to half of the scholarship could be spent on other academic programs, like a Saturday math tutoring program or a summer accelerated language course.

That year, the Carnegie Foundation had reported that 28 percent of our nation's parents would like to send their child to a different school.

Today, that number is even higher—it is, in fact, more than twice as high. A recent 2013 Luntz Global study found that 64 percent of parents said that "if given the financial opportunity," they would send one or all of their children to a different school.

The last 23 years have seen some positive changes in the ability of parents to choose their children's schools.

Today all 50 states and Washington, D.C. offer to some students alternatives to the school they would normally be assigned based on their residence.

Approximately 15 percent of school-age children attend a school other than their school of residence through open-enrollment programs.

Policies in 42 states allow some, or all, parents to send their children to public schools outside their districts.

Of those 42 states—15 states require districts to participate, 23 allow them to participate, and three require it specifically for low-income students and students in failing schools.

In 31 states, parents are allowed to choose among schools within their district.

Of those 31 states—16 states require districts to participate, 10 allow them to participate, and 6 require it for low-income students or students in failing schools 6 states.

More than 2.5 million—or nearly five percent of all public school children—are enrolled in more than 6,000 public charter schools in 42 states and D.C. Typically parents choose to enroll their children in these schools.

In addition, today more than 300,000 children are served by 41 private school choice programs across 19 states, D.C., and Douglas County, Colorado. These programs often give students who meet certain criteria—usually based on income, special needs, or academic performance—an opportunity for a voucher, tax credit program, or education savings account to allow them to attend private schools.

Also, the option for homeschooling is available in all states and parents of about three percent of school-age children choose to homeschool.

Allowing students to choose among schools is not a new idea for the federal government.

Allowing federal dollars to follow students has been a successful strategy in American education for 70 years.

In 1944, the G.I. Bill allowed veterans to choose among colleges, public or private.

Today, about \$136 billion in federal grants and loans continue to follow students to the college or university of their choice.

Just last year, Congress reauthorized the \$2.4 billion Child Care and Development Block Grant program, or CCDBG, which, when combined with other federal and state funding, helps approximately 900,000 families pay for child care of their choice while they work or attend school, mostly through vouchers.

These are among the most successful and popular federal programs—why is it so hard to apply the same sorts of choices to elementary and secondary schools?

What can the federal government do now to expand the opportunity parents have to choose the most appropriate school for their children?

The first is Scholarships for Kids. This is a bill I introduced that would use \$24 billion of the federal dollars we spend each year on K-12 education and allow states to create \$2,100 scholarships to follow 11 million low-income children to any public or private school of their parents' choice.

Also, the discussion draft I've just released to fix No Child Left Behind gives states the option of using \$14.5 billion in Title I money to follow 11 million low income children to the public school they attend.

Most people agree that Title I money, which is supposed to help low-income kids, gets diverted to different schools because of a formula that targets money to districts based on how much states spend per student. That is largely influenced by teacher salaries.

The simplest way to solve that problem is to let that money follow the child to the school they attend. You could do that to just public schools, which has been the tradition with Title I money, or to private schools, which is what I would prefer.

The second is the CHOICE Act. This is a proposal by Senator Tim Scott to allow about \$11 billion the federal government now spends for children with disabilities to follow those six million children to the schools their parents believe provide the best services.

I think it's important to note that these bills do not require states to do anything—instead they give them the option to have money follow the child.

The third is the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. Senator Scott's CHOICE Act would also expand the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program that began in 2004 and has provided about 6,000 low-income students in Washington, D.C. with the opportunity to receive a scholarship to attend a private school of their parents' choice. Today, far more parents in the city have applied for the scholarships than have received them.

The fourth is expanding charter schools. In my final year as education secretary under

President George H. W. Bush, I wrote every school superintendent in America asking them to try this new idea from Minnesota called "start-from-scratch schools." At the time there were only twelve of them. They were the first charter schools. Today there are more than 6,000.

Charter schools have had strong bipartisan support—including from President Clinton and Secretary Duncan.

We've got in our discussion draft provisions that would streamline and update the existing Charter Schools Program to:

Provide grants to State entities to start new charter schools and to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools.

Provide grants to entities to enhance credit methods to finance charter school facilities.

Provide grants to charter management organizations, like KIPP or Rocketship in my home state of Tennessee, to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools.

Our goal is to grow the federal investment in expanding and replicating high-quality charter schools with a demonstrated record of success, and hold charter schools accountable for their performance.

Other senators also have some good proposals. Senators Paul and Lee both have bills to allow federal dollars from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to follow low-income children to the public or private school of their parents' choice. Senator Rubio has a bill that creates a new federal tax credit for individual and corporate donations to organizations that provide low-income students with private school scholarships.

As for the future, I think I've learned my lesson—I'm not about to make a prediction.

It looks like it will be a while before school choice will be a matter of history.

But the progress so many have made is impressive—there is plenty of opportunity to do more.

As Ross Perot told me in 1984, "Changing the public schools of Texas was the hardest, meanest, bloodiest thing I've ever tried to do."

Since I'm not going to make a prediction then I'll end with a question—the same one I asked in 1992: If we trust parents to choose child care for their children, and we trust them to help their children choose a college to attend—and both those systems have been so successful—why do we not also trust them to choose the best elementary or high school for their children?

## HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

NAVY SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR FIRST CLASS WILLIAM MARSTON

Ms. AYOTTE. Mr. President, I wish to honor the life of William "Blake" Marston, a Navy SEAL from New Hampshire who was tragically killed in the line of duty.

Blake Marston was an extraordinary man who served our Nation with honor, courage, and commitment. His decision to become a Navy SEAL and take risks in training and combat missions alike speaks to his love of country and his dedication to serving his fellow Americans. His ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty leaves all New Hampshire citizens in Blake's debt.

Blake grew up in Bedford, NH, where he excelled as a student athlete and was known by his coaches for being a hard worker and dedicated team member. He loved baseball and was an alpine ski racer. It is clear that Blake