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Dear Mr. President:

Yesterday's results make you the first president elected in the twenty-first century. Given my very advanced age, I am delighted to be alive to wish you well. But, again because of my age, I feel compelled to do more than to convey my sincere wishes for a productive presidency. During the recent campaign you eloquently expressed two things: your frustration—frankly, bewilderment would be a more appropriate term—that past efforts to improve our schools have, generally speaking, failed, and, second, your explicit resolve and hope that you will truly be a more successful “education president” than any of your predecessors, save Thomas Jefferson. In one of your campaign speeches you said,

Improving our schools is not an important problem, it is *the* problem because the survival of our ideals is at stake. In his inaugural address Franklin Roosevelt, faced as he and the nation was with the catastrophe called The Great Depression, said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. I must tell you that today, as well as for the past half century, we have not been as fearful as we should be about the deterioration of our educational system. We have been concerned but not fearful, certainly not fearful to the point where we have been willing to say that we must have the courage to admit that we have identified the enemy and it is us: our past ways of thinking, our temporizing, our resort to quick fixes, our belief that somehow the nightmare

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will end and we will wake up to see a better day. My predecessors were well-meaning people, but it is obvious that good intentions, like love, are not enough. And neither is money. If money is the answer, should not the billions we have poured into our schools have had some discernible positive effects? If instead of billions we had expended trillions, would our educational problems have disappeared or dramatically lessened? I wish I could say that the answer is yes or even maybe. Money was not the answer to The Great Depression, World War II was. As president I will not wait for the equivalent of a war to forge a new, more effective educational system. The moment of truth has arrived. Let us greet the moment honestly, courageously, inventively, in full awareness of the failures of our past ways of thinking and acting.

Those were stirring words, even to someone like me who long ago gave up hoping that our political leaders knew (or even wanted to know) what the educational game and score were. More correctly, that even if they *knew* the game and score, would they have the will to lead the nation in truly new directions . . . even though they, like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, would be called, in certain quarters, blind radicals, or bleeding heart liberals, or betrayers of national values, or utopian fools?

May I be so bold as to say that you may not be aware of the full extent of your kinship to Franklin Roosevelt. In his campaign for the presidency in 1932—the Great Depression was in its early stages—he ran on a platform that had two major policies: to reduce and to balance the federal budget. In short, his diagnosis of the causes of the economic breakdown was monumentally in error. It was not that he was a fool but rather that he, like everyone else, simply underestimated the dimensions and complexity of what was happening. It was not until he assumed the presidency that he began to comprehend how wrong his diagnosis and policies had been. Like you, he then gave us stirring words that heralded the New Deal era. And, again like you, he told the nation that past ways of thinking and acting were no longer adequate. He had the will, and he engendered that will in the nation, to take bold actions. What is the relevance of this for your presidency? Let me put it bluntly: Nothing in what you have said about our educational problems contains your diagnosis of what we are faced with. You have said all of the right things about past

failures and our head-in-the-sands stance. It is to your credit that you have put education at the top of your agenda. Given all that has happened in the past decade, you clearly have convinced most people to support the priority you have given to education. But a priority is not a diagnosis. In this instance what I mean by a diagnosis begins with the recognition that we are not dealing with a problem and a diagnosis but a truly bewildering array of problems. If you do not know that now, your overwhelming moment of truth is not far off. What you should fear is not fear itself but the sense of being so overwhelmed by complexity that you substitute action for thinking. How will you decide what is a primary or "basic" problem? How prepared are you to resist the pressures to adapt this or that "solution," especially from quarters that, however well intentioned, have been part of the problem? Are you prepared to say loud and clear that you, we, are not faced with problems that have "solutions" in the way that four divided by two is a solution?

I confess that there is one absolutely crucial point about which you have said nothing and, therefore, that warns me not to be taken in by your inspiring words. Let me put my reservation in the form of a question. How clear is it in your head that you should have two overarching *moral* obligations: *to repair and to prevent*? It is only a slight exaggeration to say that up until now the emphasis and funding have been on repair, not prevention. Inevitably, they are interrelated, but the thinking that informs the repair effort is very different from that which informs efforts at primary prevention. You were correct to say that it was World War II that got us out of the Depression, i.e., that the repair efforts of the New Deal were inadequate. What I hoped you would go on to say is that the one piece of New Deal legislation that not only was a radical departure from our past but also the most successful was the Social Security Act. Undergirding that landmark legislation was the primary prevention way of thinking, i.e., to prevent the personal and social catastrophes of undue dependency in one's later years or in periods of unemployment. I am sure you agree with me on that point. But have you thought through what that means for how you will approach educational problems? What balance will you try to maintain between repair and prevention?

Friends tell me that there are more productive ways I can spend my remaining days than writing to you. For one thing, they tell me, it is wildly unrealistic to expect that a president can have other than a superficial knowledge of education in general and schools in

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particular. Instead of writing to the president I should find out who his educational advisors are and write to or meet with them. Better yet, they say, I should try telling the president from whom he should *not* seek advice and give him a list of people he *should* consult. Obviously, I have not heeded their counsel, and for a reason I shall get to in a moment after I have expressed the major doubt I had about writing you.

Presidents, I have concluded, are not readers. That may sound strange because a good deal of a president's time is spent reading more memoranda and reports than there are hours in the day. Indeed, a president depends on his staff to give him summary reports about reports, ending with options to consider for the purposes of action. Whatever a president reads has gone through a filtering or screening process. He assumes that what he reads contains the "guts" of a problem and the alternatives for action available to him. So why say that presidents are not readers? I say it for several reasons. First, reading summaries of summaries is no substitute for grasping the complexities of problems. Problems, *important* problems, are not only horribly complex but they have a history of errors of omission and commission that, if you are ignorant of them, makes it likely you will repeat those errors. No one, least of all me, expects you to bone up on the history of all important problems. But I do expect that that is precisely what you should feel obliged to do about a problem, in this case education, that you have put at the top of your agenda. To the extent that you depend on summaries of summaries, to the extent that you do not feel *compelled* to familiarize yourself with this problem, to the extent that you do not have the *curiosity* truly to read, to sample, in the literature on education, you are very likely to pursue courses of action that end up proving that the more things change the more they remain the same. Or, as with education, the more they get worse.

Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy were readers. They had a sense of history, better yet, a respect for history. They did not view history as a museum of relics to which you go on a rainy Sunday. I confess that nothing I have read about you suggests that you are a reader, that you will not be satisfied to "see" education only in terms of summaries of summaries. I hope you prove me wrong. Why anyone would want to be president of the United States has long mystified me. In many ways it is an impossible job. We are used to hearing that the presidency is the most powerful office in the

world. I assume you have read enough to know that by the time a president leaves office he (someday it will be a she) is the world's expert on the constraints on the office. In regard to education you will find many constraints: constitutional, political, economic, and institutional. Those constraints are real, strong, and trying. But there is no constraint on articulating a vision, and by that I do not mean the mouthing of cliches, pious generalizations, and empty rhetoric. In fact, one of your major obstacles in improving our schools is that many people believe the situation is hopeless. No one has given them reason to hope, once again, that we are moving in new, challenging ways. No one has given them a compelling basis for believing that someone is, finally, getting at the heart of the problem. Far from being hopeful, people are resigned to a hostile apathy. No one has made them think. No one has clearly posed for them the hard choices they must think about. No one has reinvigorated, or even articulated, a sense of national mission. The people are wise, not jaded. Their stance is: We have heard it all before, why should we listen again? They know something is wrong. They are waiting for a new vision that will have the ring of truth, the ring that says: Yes, *that is* what we have forgotten, *that is* what we have to take seriously, *that* we must act on come what may.

So what should you read? I attach a small list of books. I hope that you will not view it as a display of hubris on my part that a couple of my books are included. They are there not because I have ever said anything new but because they contain the ideas of several writers you should take most seriously. Indeed, if the pressures on your time permit you to read only one book on that list, it should be the one by Alfred North Whitehead. He was no bleeding heart liberal or mindless reactionary. He was a philosopher, a stellar logician-mathematician who understood two related things: the nature and force of children's curiosity, and the ways that curiosity is too often blunted or extinguished in classrooms. That is to say, he understood the differences between productive and unproductive contexts for learning. What Whitehead understood gets to the heart of the matter: how to sustain the boundless curiosity of very young children who leave their "wonder years" for years in the classroom. Many other writers have said the same things. And that is the point you must not allow yourself to forget: The core problem has long been identified. There is no great mystery here. Our past failures inhere in the inability or unwillingness to take it seriously. Inability or unwillingness

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may be inappropriate characterizations. It may be more correct to say that there has been a lack of leadership to give people a vision of what we would have to do if we took these things seriously. What you have thus far said publicly is not a vision but an expression of your resolve, your concerns, your hopes. In times of threats to our national security a president has no difficulty rallying people around our flag. The threat is concretely there, the people know it, they are willing to do whatever is necessary to repulse the threat. The people know *it*, and the recognition of it does not follow a Madison Avenue campaign of persuasion. In the case of education—which, as you have said, is as serious a threat as a foreign enemy to our security—no one has defined the central problem, the *it*. If people know anything, it is that in response to the educational crisis there have been many “its” and many failures. The American people are not stupid. In the case of education today it is as if everyone is from Missouri. They want to be convinced and so they ask: Where is the beef? Why should we get our hopes up again?

This letter is much longer than I intended. I initially thought I would convince you that you know far more about the important problems in education than you realize. Indeed, I was going to urge you to refrain from undue dependency on experts. You will have need for experts, but their value to you will be determined by how conscientiously you first look into *your* experiences as a student. You do not regard yourself as an expert, but I will try in my next letter to convince you that in an important way *you are* an expert.

I have not introduced myself to you and that was deliberate. Who I am, what I have done, what I have written should be of no importance to you. I know that sounds strange, if not ridiculous. My plea to you is to read this and subsequent letters with one question in mind: Do these letters have the ring of truth? I shall not, I assure you, present you with “data”: statistics, graphs, research data, commission reports, etc. If sheer volume of *valid* knowledge were necessary and sufficient, we would not be in the morass we are. I have read that your favorite musical is *Guys and Dolls*. You will recall that delightful song “Adelaide’s Lament” wherein she concludes that medical explanations of her psychosomatic upper respiratory colds are for the birds because they do not get “where the problem is”: her single, unmarried status. What I shall endeavor to demonstrate in these letters is that in the case of our educational problems we have not dealt with where the problem is.

Between now and your inaugural you will be quite busy. But I do hope that you will find it in your self-interest to read my letter. It would certainly brighten my remaining days if you were to respond, however briefly, to anything I write. I confess I entertain the thought (fantasy?) that what I will say to you is very important for you and our country. It may be a delusion of grandeur on my part to believe that if you take what I say seriously, you will not end up as a footnote in future history books but with pages describing your courage to give the American people a basis for reeducating themselves about the purposes of American schools. Our country has two kinds of history. One celebrates our traditions, values, and accomplishments. The other catalogues our departures from what we have stood for and should have done. You have the opportunity to lead this country in ways that will justify celebration and not add to the litany of our failures.

Respectfully,

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P.S. Before writing this letter I assumed that I would not write a second one until I received a reply from you. I have changed my mind for two reasons. The first is that it is unrealistic to expect you to reply "promptly." You are swamped with the details of planning, selecting staff and cabinet, and ordering your priorities. The second is more personal but no less realistic: I am understandably aware that my days are numbered and that I should devote what energies I have to doing what I enjoy most, which is thinking and writing. So at varying intervals I will be sending you letters. But I do hope that at some not-too-distant week I will hear from you.