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Fix public education, end high stakes testing, pass ESEA

By Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II

All lives of students matter. Children come into life with fresh eyes, fresh minds, and boundless hope and energy. Our elders created schools, and taxed themselves to pay for well-educated, loving people to be teachers, to keep that hope, energy, and freshness alive through the first two decades of life. But every day we hear of kids being bullied, giving up, dropping out, losing hope. To stop this man-made flood from schools to prisons, we need an all-out, multi-dimensional effort.

I write today because all people of good will, all patriotic Americans, have a chance to do something now to begin repairing the striking poverty breach that is so plain. Congress is preparing to vote on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) on its 50th anniversary. What they decide now can change the course of federal aid to education for decades to come.

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My father taught physics at the high school I attended in one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. My mother has worked in the same high school for more than 40 years. My five children worked their way through public schools in the poorest part of our state. One earned a PhD from Harvard in public health; one starts law school this fall; and two are working on their college degrees. My youngest son has several more years of public school ahead of him.

But my heart aches for their peers. Everywhere I go, I see children attending under-funded schools with

over-worked teachers. The seeds of justice and love that we try to sow have a hard time taking root, when they land on hungry stomachs and hopeless hearts. Kids are born as hungry to learn as they are to eat. All of them need learning environments that help them thrive and live purposeful, prosperous lives. Educational opportunities and

qualified, caring teachers make this dream possible. But as we under-resource our public schools, we are not just deferring dreams, we are shriveling and stomping on them.

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) has tried to alert the nation for years about the crisis in our schools. Their 2013 report makes the problem plain. SEF Vice President Steve Suitts said, “Without improving the educational support that the nation provides its low income students – students with the largest needs and usually with the least support -- the trends of the last decade will be prologue for a nation not at risk, but a nation in decline...”

In our Moral Monday Movement in North Carolina, we believe we must engage in every non-violent means of struggle possible to stop the tea party extremist attack on our teachers, our schools, and our children. If we sit back and watch extremists destroy our University and public school systems, we are discredited before our children, and we forfeit our chance to be called ‘repairers of the breach.’

When Congress enacted the ESEA in 1965, everyone knew education opportunities for black children were radically unequal to the opportunities for white students. Now, 50 years later, these gaps persist and are widening--despite the law’s promise to level the playing field for the nation’s most vulnerable students.

The last time Congress reauthorized ESEA, they and President George W. Bush established high-stakes testing, labeling, and policies that punish schools if kids flunked the tests. Tests don’t teach. Nurturing creative adults who know how to draw out individual children are what education is about. We don’t send our kids to school to become skilled test takers. We pay our taxes and send our kids to public schools because we need future corporate CEOs, cardiologists and aerodynamic engineers, university presidents and school principals, urban planners and architects. Our sons and daughters can’t reach these heights when accountability in our education system hinges on standardized test scores, not cultivating intellectual opportunity—the real measure of education. Standardized tests can tell us only so much. Educators know that annual multi-dimensional assessments that tell us whether a child is falling behind, whether she or he needs intervention and support the school can’t provide, or if a youngster is on track to graduate are the tools they need—not a single number.

Congress has a chance to fix the high stakes testing regime that has failed. Congress has the chance to deliver on its promise of educational opportunities for all students, especially the nation’s most vulnerable ones, which is the purpose of ESEA. Congress has the chance to repair the breach caused by sins and systems of slavery and segregation.

All our children have a fundamental civil right to a quality education. The ESEA can help make schools of hope and love. Stop drying up our kids’ dreams, like raisins in the sun.

Barber is the current president of the North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, the National NAACP chair of the Legislative Political Action Committee, and founder of Moral Mondays.