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Final Paper

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During his State of the Union address on January 20, 2010, President Obama discussed an initiative for improving the achievement of students who attend schools in low income areas. He received a standing ovation when he said, “Gone are the days when a high school dropout can find a job in a factory, few are the days left when a high school diploma will provide opportunity. As we move into an innovative economy, we must fix our education system by ensuring quality instruction to those students who are having the most difficulty achieving. The future of our economy lies in providing education and opportunity to those who have the most difficulty obtaining it.” The focus of this statement is to improve the quality of teachers in schools in low socioeconomic areas where students achieve at a lower rate and are less likely to complete high school or go to college. As the economy becomes more focused on innovation and less focused on manufacturing, we need a highly educated work force to compete in the global arena. By providing a higher quality of instruction for students from lower income backgrounds, they will be more likely to achieve at a higher rate. Higher achievement will help prevent students from dropping out of high school and create more opportunities for those students to attend college.

President Obama intends to accomplish this by immediately introducing a one billion dollar plan that will be divided up by all of the states and go directly towards teacher salaries in the schools in low socioeconomic areas. Currently, teachers in the lower income schools have less education and experience than those in the more affluent ones. The retention rate is much lower making it challenging to have experienced, educated teachers providing quality instruction to the students who need it the most. The money will increase salaries substantially making teaching positions in low income schools more attractive to highly qualified, veteran teachers.

The quality of instruction for the lower achieving students will be drastically improved and as a result, achievement will increase in these schools. Improving the quality of instruction will also decrease the dropout rate and create the opportunity for students in the lower achieving schools to complete a college education.

John Wilson, Executive Director of the National Education Association commented on this initiative by saying, “Something has to be done to resolve this issue, however, I do not know if this is the right path.” U.S. Representative John Kline (R-MN), the minority leader of the House Committee on Education and Labor did not agree with this policy by making the statement, “The problem with the achievement of these students has nothing to do with the quality of instruction. They are not being properly motivated. Throwing money at this problem will not solve it.”

The debate on this policy will continue as it is drafted into legislation and moves across the floor for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The policy will also need close examination in terms of fiscal practicality particularly at a time when many other expensive projects are being launched. In order to be effective, this initiative will require at least one billion dollars a year to maintain it until there are fewer schools in low socioeconomic areas. However, this investment could give the economy the boost it needs as higher achieving students will yield a more qualified workforce in the global economy which will increase the national tax base creating an equitable return on the investment.

Policy Analysis

The policy discussed during the State of the Union address for one billion dollars to be allocated specifically for increasing salaries to attract highly qualified teachers for school

districts in low income areas will need to be drafted into legislation and approved by Congress to become a reality. Being that states have typically been responsible for allocating their budgets in education, this is an innovative move to target a specific issue. While the stated intention is to create a more educated workforce to contribute to an innovative economy, there are other issues to be considered with this policy. The true motivation for this policy, consequences, and the motion through policy channels will be discussed.

As the world moves towards an innovative economy, a highly educated workforce is necessary to stay competitive in a global market. Creating more opportunities for students who are currently achieving at a low level will benefit the economy. The president may be attempting to draw innovative industry to the nation by improving the overall education of the workforce. There may be other motivation behind the president's plan. Given that the low socioeconomic schools tend to be in either urban or rural areas, the president may be attempting to gain support in some of the states he lost in the 2008 election by focusing on their education systems. Both Texas and Louisiana have urban and rural areas that could benefit from this sort of funding.

Before legislation on this policy is passed, both the positive and negative consequences need to be considered. The positive result would be that the policy could potentially attract highly qualified teachers are attracted to low income schools. However, the reaction of teachers being disproportionately compensated for their qualifications needs to be considered. The increased salary for the low income schools may create the same problem for the affluent schools the policy is attempting to resolve. Teachers working in the more affluent schools may become of a lesser quality and while the achievement discrepancy may be neutralized there is a possibility that it might swing the other way. If the students in the higher income schools fail to

achieve as a result of this policy then the policy will not accomplish its goal of creating a highly educated workforce.

In order to be passed into legislation interest groups that support both education and low income students will need to endorse this policy. The support of the interest groups will be conveyed to the politicians drafting the legislation. Teacher unions may find it necessary to account for the disproportionate salaries between teachers in low and high income schools. However, support groups representing people from low income areas may stand strongly behind this policy to create more opportunities for the people they serve. A compromise between the interest groups may be for an alternative policy that applies the funds to all teacher salaries in an attempt to attract more talented individuals to the field. A member of Congress may champion this policy as an entrepreneur attempting to gain the favor of the interest groups. As the legislation moves from draft to committee and across the floor of the House and Senate, it may look much different from where it started. The budget would need to be balanced to ensure the funding was available for this policy. An instrument to determine the effectiveness of this program will need to be developed to determine if it is worth the funding. Nonetheless, the support of interest groups as well as a need determined by the national mood will be necessary for the legislation to be passed.

The enhancement of teacher salaries by the federal government is a unique approach to solving the problem of poor achievement in low income schools. While it may improve the achievement of the targeted population there is a strong potential for the cost and consequences for other students to outweigh the benefit of the policy in regards to the overall purpose. An alternative policy would be necessary at the federal level to solve this problem while determining teacher salaries should be left to state and local policy makers.

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