

Written Statement of Dr. John King
Before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
on the
Nomination of Dr. John King to serve as Secretary of Education

February 25, 2016

Thank you, Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the Committee for welcoming me here today. I have dedicated my career to serving the needs of children and their families, so it is with great humility and a deep sense of honor that I appear before you as President Obama's nominee to continue that work as education secretary.

I am proud to be here today with my wife, Melissa, and our two wonderful daughters, Amina and Mireya.

I am grateful to the President for his faith and confidence in me.

I am appreciative of the longstanding work and continued focus by every member of this Committee on the education of our nation's learners – from early childhood through postsecondary success. I'm especially thankful to Chairman Alexander and Senator Murray for your personal commitment and leadership on education, and for the recent effort of the Committee to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This Committee's work on that bill is a reminder to all of us that bipartisan compromise is not just still possible; it's capable of delivering meaningful legislation and necessary changes. I look forward to continuing to work with all of you in that same bipartisan spirit.

And I am mindful of how remarkable it is that I am here at all. As some of you may know, I believe education is the difference between hope and despair – between life and death, even – because it was for me.

I grew up in East Flatbush, Brooklyn; the son of John and Adalinda King, two lifelong New York City public school educators. My father grew up poor in Bedford Stuyvesant, yet by the end of his career he had become one of the highest-ranking African-American educators in the country. My mother came to New York from Puerto Rico as a little girl and was raised by a single mother who was a garment worker, yet she found a way to become the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Although I never had the chance to know them well, my parents' faith in education continues to inspire me.

When I was eight, my mother had a heart attack and passed away. My father died just four years later—after suffering through undiagnosed Alzheimer's that made our home a

scary and unpredictable place.

Amidst all the trauma and uncertainty, school was my refuge, and teachers were my saviors.

I am here today because of Mr. Osterweil, my teacher at P.S. 276 in Canarsie who required me to read the *New York Times* every day, and who made me feel safe, nurtured, and challenged.

And I am here because of Celestine Dessasure – Miss D – who turned her social studies classroom at Mark Twain Junior High School in Coney Island into an actor’s studio, and whose lessons proved that rigor and joy are not mutually exclusive.

My New York City public school teachers literally saved my life. If not for them, I could not have survived that turbulent period, and I certainly wouldn’t be sitting before you today.

The influence they had on me, coupled with the example my parents provided, led me to become a teacher myself.

But there are still so many young people out there like me, children whose paths to school have been marked by burdens no young person should have to bear. We owe it to those children to make school for them what it was for me.

That’s why I feel such urgency about the work of education. That’s what led me to help found a school and then a school network. And it’s what drove me in my tenure as the Deputy Commissioner and then Commissioner of Education in New York State.

Roxbury Prep, the first school I co-founded, and one that is filled with young people from backgrounds like mine, became one of the highest-performing urban middle schools in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. The Uncommon Schools network that my colleagues and I created now includes nearly fifty high-performing urban schools, and impacts the lives of thousands of low-income students every day. And as a result of my tenure in Albany, I am proud to say that New York is now a leading state in its work to bring together K-12, postsecondary and business partners to expand access to high-quality career and technical education; in its commitment to create socioeconomically diverse schools; and in its work to improve the preparation and certification of its teachers, as the state transitions to more rigorous expectations for students.

I’ve also learned from each successive challenge about how to create lasting change. Since leaving Roxbury Prep and Uncommon, I’ve thought a lot about the importance of both holding students to high expectations and fostering a safe, welcoming school climate. Too often, we have seen a false dichotomy between the belief that schools alone can overcome outside forces and the belief that schools are powerless in the face of those forces. In my time in New York, I was reminded often of how critical it is that policymakers remain in constant communication with parents and teachers—the adults

who are most responsible for shaping the daily experiences of our children. I have been working on that here in Washington.

All of these experiences have only reaffirmed my belief that educational equity and excellence must be national civil rights priorities.

Thanks to the work of this Committee, the Obama Administration, and our nation's educators and parents, there are many reasons to feel hopeful.

Last year, we achieved the highest graduation rate we've ever had as a country—82 percent. This progress was driven in no small part by significant reductions in the dropout rate among African-American, Latino, and low-income students. Since 2008, we have halved the number of “dropout factory” high schools. A million more African-American and Latino students are in college today than when the President took office. Tens of thousands of children now have access to high-quality preschool and millions more students have access to higher education.

These are meaningful, positive steps.

And yet, there is still much work to be done.

For all their progress our children of color and low-income children still stand too far behind their peers in nearly every important measure of school achievement. So do our rural students and students with disabilities, our English Learners, Native American students, and homeless students.

And in far too many schools, we still offer them less—less access to the best teachers, less access to the most challenging courses, less access to art and music, and less access to the resources necessary to thrive.

We need to support teachers and educators as they raise academic expectations for all of our students – so that they are prepared to compete with their peers in other nations. We need to offer students more affordable college choices, and to help more of them graduate. The most affluent students are still six times more likely to complete college than low-income students, and too many Americans are still struggling to pay back their student loan debt.

So we have urgent work to do.

We are not yet what we ought to be.

But I believe we stand positioned to move closer to what we ought to be, in part thanks to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). With ESSA, Congress has reinforced the federal commitment to holding our nation's schools accountable for the progress of all students. In this new era, the locus of decision-making around the most appropriate supports, interventions, and rewards in our schools is rightly shifting back to states and

districts—and away from the one-size-fits-all mandates of No Child Left Behind. As a former teacher, principal, and state commissioner, I know from personal experience that the best ideas come from classrooms, not conference rooms.

The new law provides a renewed opportunity to focus on preparing every young person for success in college and future careers, and that demographics do not determine destiny—starting with our youngest learners.

It preserves the critical federal role to ensure guardrails to protect civil rights. But it also gives educators and state and local leaders the freedom to establish better, more balanced ways of assessing student learning, including looking beyond just test scores.

It maintains the principle that, when groups of students or entire schools are falling behind, action will be taken to provide the supports necessary to foster progress. And it creates the opportunity to reclaim the goal of a well-rounded education for all students: an education that not only includes strong numeracy and literacy but access to science, social studies, the arts, physical education and health, and the opportunity to learn a second or third language.

The start of a new era also brings with it an opening for a much-needed reset in the national dialogue. Over the last few years, education policy discussions have too often been characterized by more heat than light – especially where educators are concerned. Despite the best of intentions, teachers and principals, at times, have felt attacked and unfairly blamed. All of us – at the local, state, and federal level – have to take responsibility for the climate that exists. And all of us must do whatever we can to change it.

We know – and I know personally, because I lived it – the importance of great teachers. That’s why one of my highest priorities as education secretary would be to lift up the teaching profession, and find more ways to celebrate, support, and sustain our nation’s educators.

In so many ways, this is a unique moment in our nation’s educational journey. The passage of ESSA should not be the end of a road; it should be the beginning of many.

Let’s harness the bipartisan momentum of last year to make this year one of continued progress. Just as No Child Left Behind was overdue for a rewrite, so too is the Perkins Act. Let’s make 2016 the year we transform career and technical education for the 21st century by driving innovation and quality.

Just as we were up for the challenge in pre-K through high school, let’s work together to advance improvements to the Higher Education Act. And let’s ensure that every student has the opportunity to obtain the post-secondary education needed to gain the knowledge and skills that will shape success in today’s economy—whether in the form of a 2-year or 4-year college degree, or an industry credential and direct pathway to a well-paying job.

Together, we can fortify the Pell program as an engine of opportunity. And we can support the innovative ideas of schools around the country to serve more students at a lower cost, and ensure that students don't just start college but complete it with an affordable, high-quality degree. That includes working with you to build on our efforts to support students and families who are managing their student loan debt.

None of this will be easy—the most critical work rarely is. But I appear before you ready for the challenge, and mindful of the tremendous urgency we must bring to the tasks at hand.

If you'll indulge me, I'll close with a story about my father that captures that sense of urgency.

My father loved basketball, and one weekend, while playing, he broke his wrist. When he went to work on Monday, with his wrist in a cast, the principal stopped him and said, "Mr. King, you can't teach today." The principal said there was a regulation back then about not teaching with a cast, and the principal refused to budge.

So what did my father do? He walked over to the counter and smashed the cast into pieces. Then he brushed those pieces into a trashcan, put his hand in his suit pocket, and went to teach his class.

My father knew that schools save lives. And though he never could have imagined it then, I sit here decades later as living proof that he was right. Like my parents; like the President and First Lady; like all of you, I believe that education is at the heart of our promise of equality of opportunity for all Americans.

If confirmed, it will be my great privilege and honor to continue working with you to realize that promise in the months ahead.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to your questions.