

## Mrs. Alma J. Powell Remarks for National Press Club (April 1, 2009)

<http://www.americaspromise.org/About-the-Alliance/Press-Room/Speeches-and-Quotes/2009-Alma-April-1.aspx>

Thank you, Donna, for that gracious introduction. It is wonderful to be with you today.

I couldn't help but notice that you invited me to speak on April Fool's Day...

But actually, it's appropriate that we're here on April 1. For too long, as a nation we have fooled ourselves into a false sense of security while a graduation crisis eats away at our economic future. We have fooled ourselves into thinking that we can continue to prosper when nearly one-third of our students drop out of high school... and when many more of those who earn diplomas lack the skills for college and the workforce.

One reason I am here today is to tell you what we are doing about the future of our young people — and why it is a matter of utmost concern.

Let me start with a little background. America's Promise Alliance, which I am proud to serve, grew out of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future 12 years ago. All the living presidents came together where our nation began, in Philadelphia.

The presidents signed a declaration that included these words: "As each of us has the right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, each of us has... a duty to take responsibility not just for ourselves and our families but for one another."

The Presidents affirmed that we especially share an obligation to our children... to see that we fulfill five essential promises in their lives:

- Caring adults who are actively involved as parents, teachers, mentors, coaches and neighbors;
- Safe places that offer constructive use of time;
- A healthy start and healthy development;
- Effective education that prepares them for college, work and life; and
- Opportunities to learn the value of service.

The work of America's Promise Alliance has always revolved around these Five Promises. And it revolves around the simple idea that we can achieve more by working together than any one organization can achieve alone. Simply put, we're better together.

Our Alliance now has 280 national partners, up from 160 last year. These partners represent the business community, educators, nonprofits, policymakers, and many others. Our unique strength is our ability to mobilize Americans through our partners and their local networks.

And that ability has never been more important. When we started, our goal was to reach 2 million children by the year 2000. We engaged Communities of Promise around the country. We saw two million more children receive mentors.

But we knew that this was only the beginning... only an initial investment. By working together, we can accomplish so much more.

## **The Dropout Campaign**

Today marks a special anniversary. Exactly one year ago, our Alliance launched a campaign to mobilize the country to act on the high school dropout crisis.

About one-third of our students fail to graduate high school each year. That's one every 26 seconds. To put that another way, every three years we are losing an entire class.

This is alarming. It is unacceptable. And it is very closely linked to the economic crisis and our future success in the global marketplace.

When we began the Dropout Prevention Campaign, we released a report called Cities in Crisis. It showed a troubling picture. In the largest public school districts of our 50 largest cities, the average graduation rate is around 50%. That's just the average. In some city school systems, barely one in three young people graduate.

In a few weeks, on April 22, we'll release Cities in Crisis 2. In addition to the newest information, this updated report will measure the economic impact of dropouts in our cities. It will analyze some key indicators, including the educational level of the workforce and the economic returns on education. The new report will shine a bright light on how much opportunity — both economic and personal — is lost when young people don't earn a high school diploma.

## **Why It Matters: What Happens When Kids Drop Out**

So what can we do for our children? How can we help turn the tide on the graduation crisis and fuel the American economy? It comes back to the Five Promises. Having at least four of the Five Promises dramatically improves the odds that a young person will graduate. And graduating from high school ready for college and work dramatically changes the odds of success for that person.

Chances are you grew up with caring adults in your life... people who took an interest in you and kept you on the right path. Chances are you had places where you could be safe and stay out of trouble. Chances are you had the things that make for healthy development, and an education that prepared you for college and work. And you had opportunities to learn the value of service.

Having those Five Promises made you twice as likely to earn mostly A's in school. They made you much more likely to go to college, to vote and to be involved in the community.

But imagine that you had only one or NONE of the Promises. That's the reality for over 20% of our young people. Suddenly, the odds change. You're much less likely to do well in school. You're at much greater risk for being involved in violence. You're at greater risk for dropping out.

And when you drop out, your chances of success become even slimmer. The statistics say you will earn only about one-third the income of a college graduate — less than \$20 000 a year. And even if you earn a GED, you'll barely begin to close the income gap.

There's a 75% chance you'll receive food stamps or other assistance. You're eight times more likely to wind up in prison. And you're likely to become the parent of a dropout and perpetuate this vicious cycle.

### **The Crisis in Readiness**

Dropouts are not the only crisis. Of our students who do earn a degree, far too few are ready for college or the workforce. Over 80% of tomorrow's jobs will demand post-secondary education. Yet only 40% of our graduates go on to college. Of those students, a large number need remedial classes before they can do even basic college work.

Only about half of those who start college will finish.

As President Obama said, "This is a prescription for economic decline."

### **Stress the Urgency**

The economic impact is why the dropout situation is so urgent. Yes, we face a number of urgent priorities right now. And there are those who say we should put ourselves on the road to economic recovery before we focus on education.

I am here to tell you something different. We are simply not going to sustain our ability to compete in a global economy until we raise our graduation rates to the standard set by the rest of the industrial world — and until we ensure that our graduates are ready for college and the workforce.

I like the way our new Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, put it: "In the long run, the only solution to the economic crisis is to educate our way out of it."

### **An Economic Necessity and a Moral Imperative**

We pay an enormous price when our kids are unprepared. We pay billions in higher costs for social services and criminal justice. We pay billions in lost tax revenues. We pay with a less competitive workforce.

And most tragically, we pay with a promise of opportunity that rings hollow for too many children.

We can no longer afford this. While we fix our banking system, we must also invest in America's human capital... the promise and potential of our young people... the engine that will drive our economy in the years to come.

### **Our Response**

President Obama has said, “When you drop out, you’re not just quitting on yourself. You’re quitting on your country.” We would take that one step further: If we turn a blind eye when kids drop out, WE are quitting on them and on our common future.

But we are not going to quit.

### **APA’s Work with Dropout Prevention Campaign**

The top priority of our Alliance partners is to improve graduation rates and ensure young people are ready for college, work and life. And we are working to mobilize the whole nation.

In partnership with State Farm, AT&T, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we’re galvanizing dropout prevention movements in all 50 states and 55 targeted cities. We’re bringing together governors and mayors, and leaders from communities, schools, business, parents, young people and government to work together in new ways. We’re raising awareness and getting communities to take action based on best practices.

### **Grad Nation**

Toward that end, we have just released a powerful tool called Grad Nation. It gives all communities a step-by-step roadmap for assessing their dropout problem, engaging the wider community and improving graduation rates.

### **Gallup Student Poll**

In addition, Gallup has developed for us a new poll that, for the first time, will capture the voices of students themselves. This online poll will measure students’ sense of hope, engagement and well-being — which are very reliable predictors of their success in school. It will also help communities pinpoint problems and plan responses.

Hope, the ideas and energy a child has for the future, drives attendance, credits earned, and GPA.

Engagement, a child’s involvement in school, distinguishes between low and high performing schools.

Well-being, how children think about and experience their lives, tells us how our young people are doing and predicts their success in the future.

As of last week, Gallup had already surveyed over 50,000 students. Only half say they’re hopeful. Just 49% say they are engaged. And only 26% describe themselves as hopeful, engaged and thriving.

We clearly have work to do.

### **Carmita Vaughan, Leading Dropout Prevention Campaign**

To lead our Dropout Prevention Campaign, America's Promise has just brought on board Carmita Vaughan as our new Chief Strategy Officer, who was introduced earlier. [Acknowledge Carmita, she will have been introduced already]

Carmita has served as Chief of Staff of Chicago Public Schools' Office of High Schools, where she worked closely with Secretary Duncan. Her systematic approach to addressing at-risk students and dropouts offers a great example of what we can accomplish together.

### **Examples of What Works**

The good news is that this is a problem we can fix. We know what success looks like.

There are great examples right here in Washington and around the country:

What these programs have in common is that they surround children with the Five Promises. And they allow children to envision meaningful futures for themselves. Those factors make all the difference.

### **School Reform Is Essential But Not Enough**

The connection between the Five Promises and success also points to why school reform is only part of the solution. Yes, we need more academic rigor. We need to target failing schools, especially because just 15% of schools account for 50% of our dropouts.

And, yes, we need to support our schools with far more resources — like early-warning systems to identify students who are off track. We need to create multiple pathways to graduation.

But we also need to do more.

### **Address the Whole Child**

First, we need to do more to address the needs of children beyond the classroom. Non-school factors make a big impact on school achievement. As just one quick example:

One of our Alliance's national priorities involves seeing that 4 million uninsured children eligible for CHIP or Medicaid get enrolled and receive coverage.

What does that have to do with dropouts? Well, studies show that kids who are enrolled in these programs are absent less often from school, and you can draw a direct line between absenteeism and dropouts. Students who get care for vision and hearing problems do better in school. It's all connected.

And by the way, you may not know that our Alliance's nonpartisan affiliate, First Focus, was deeply involved on Capitol Hill with the CHIP renewal. I'm pleased that Ralph Forsht from First Focus was able to be with us today. He and Bruce Lesley, the president of First Focus, are great sources for you on issues related to children and families.

## **Connecting Kids to Futures**

Second, we need to do more to connect children to meaningful futures. When you talk to dropouts, it's amazing how many say they had wanted to be lawyers or doctors or nuclear scientists. But something happened to their expectations for themselves.

We know that dropping out is not an event. It is a process that begins early.

Most of those who drop out begin to disengage during middle-school. They're not failing, but they're not doing well. They don't see the point anymore. They don't find it relevant to the "real world." They don't see how they fit in. They start missing school. Chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest warning signs of an impending dropout.

About half of all dropouts leave before the end of the 10th grade.

That's why another of our national priorities is to make sure that all middle-school students get more opportunities to explore careers and also engage in service-learning. We know that both of these contribute to higher graduation rates.

## **Engaging Parents**

Third, we need to do more to engage parents. We sometimes forget that parents are a child's first teacher. They are key to any dropout prevention strategy. Part of their job involves turning off the TV and video games and making sure the homework gets done. Spend time reading to young children.

But it also means making it easier for parents to be partners in their children's education. You know, there's a popular myth that parents of disadvantaged young people are disengaged. But it's just not true.

I read an inspiring story in the Post the other day about Seat Pleasant Elementary School in Prince George's County. It's a school where 70% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Yet 80% of the students in grades 3 through 6 are proficient in reading and math. (By the way, if you're not reading at grade level by fourth grade, your chances of dropping out go way up.)

One big reason for this school's success is that it stays open two extra hours each day to help students with reading and math.

And even though the program is voluntary, 80% of the parents signed up their children. The principal already knows what she'll do with any stimulus money her school receives: Expand the program all the way down to Pre-K.

Don't let anyone convince you that low-income parents don't want to be involved. Let's give parents more opportunities.

## **Engaging Communities**

Fourth, we need to do more to engage the community. For too long, we have expected our schools to do it all. In other words, we have asked them to do the impossible.

Again, one of our Alliance's national priorities is to use schools as hubs — so communities can support those schools with more resources children and families need.

I am delighted that the new administration shares the idea of making schools the centers of communities. The more we open up our schools as places where we all work together for children and families, the more we will help students reach their full potential.

### **Building a Culture of Service**

Finally, to change the lives of children, we must do more to rebuild a culture of service. It goes back to one of the founding principles of our Alliance.

I've already mentioned the connection between service learning and graduation rates.

But it is also through a culture of service that we bring to bear a powerful weapon against the dropout crisis.

I believe that Americans today, especially young Americans, are ready to be respond if we call on them. They're applying for Teach for America like never before. They're joining AmeriCorps and the National Community Health Corps.

Every act of service is a ripple. Millions of ripples, building on each other, become an unstoppable wave.

### **Challenge to the Media**

Later this year we will announce a journalism award for outstanding coverage of issues related to children's well-being. On that note, I want to leave you with a challenge.

For years, the dropout crisis and the college readiness crisis have operated below the radar for most Americans. Please do all you can to help more of our citizens understand how serious these crises are and what's at stake.

Help Americans understand that if our children are not equipped to succeed, our nation is not moving forward. Show them positive stories — and there are many — of how communities are pulling together and making a difference.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the challenges we face, and the hard work ahead, I am optimistic today.

We know what it takes to help our children graduate from high school ready for college, work and life. We know that the job is not so much about seeking the answers as summoning the will.

With your help in keeping children before our national conscience, I believe that our nation is ready to answer improve the lives of children throughout the country.

But it will take all of us: parents, teachers, young people, community leaders, policymakers, faith leaders, business people, journalists, and more.

Because we truly are better together.

Thank you.