

Remarks by Seattle City Councilmember Tim Burgess  
Youth and Family Congress  
Saturday, June 4, 2010, Rainier Room Seattle Center

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Thank you, Mayor McGinn, for starting this important conversation about the future of our youth and families.

And thank you, Congress delegates. You have given your time and your energy and you have demonstrated your passion to serve the children of Seattle.

These last few months, in hundreds of meetings big and small all over the city, you identified a range of priorities and issues to tackle.

Like you, I believe some of our greatest challenges involve our schools and the education of our kids.

I graduated from Lincoln High School in Wallingford 43 years ago this month; we faced similar issues. Some of our schools weren't as good as others, especially in our poorer neighborhoods. And guess what, the academic achievement gap existed back then, too.

But what's so encouraging to me right now as I look at you is the power that's in this room . . . the power each of you hold.

Look back over American history. All of our great social and political reform movements started with an individual or small group of people.

A few brave souls in church basements in the south launched and sustained the civil rights movement.

A few women got together and agreed that they, too, should have the right to vote and they persuaded a nation to change.

More recently, a young man born in Hawaii, with a mother from Kansas and a father from Kenya, decided to step up and change America. He said "yes we can" but first he said to himself "yes I can." Who would have thought?

And now President Obama is leading an education revolution that has the potential to fundamentally change what I saw 43 years ago and what we all see today. President Obama is saying that the status quo is no longer acceptable, that we will change America's education system so every child no matter where they live, no matter the color of their skin, no matter

their social status or class, every child will receive an excellent education that will send them to college or to the career of their choice.

We, together, can bring this education revolution to Seattle. This is our time. This is our opportunity. This is our chance.

Seattle is often rated by different magazines as one of the “best places to live” or “smartest” cities in the United States. I think they’re right. Our region produces and markets some of the best airplanes, software, coffee and biotechnology in the world.

No region or city can match our leadership or innovation in global health.

And there is no reason why we can't also have a world-class public education system . . . a system where our children excel and our teachers are honored and rewarded for their effective work and measurable results.

As you step forward and lead, my colleagues and I at the City Council will be with you. And this is important work because keeping our kids in school, giving them a world-class education, helping them from birth to college and beyond is exactly what will sustain this city, make our economy strong, and make us proud to be Seattleites.

Of course, to do this we will have to make some tough choices because we have limited resources.

Tough choices for some of us to give up our privilege.

Tough choices to acknowledge systemic and institutional problems that have plagued us for so, so long.

Tough choices to acknowledge that some of our programs work and others don’t, that we need to follow the science of measurement and evaluation.

But what’s most important is that you and I engage in this effort. It’s not acceptable to continue to live with 43 years of failure, 43 years of excuses.

Frederick Douglass, the slave who educated himself to freedom by learning to read and write said this about our challenge: “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

That’s our challenge today. Let’s build strong children! Can we do that?

Let’s build strong children. Let’s begin the education revolution right here, right now.

And when you step out and lead, don't despair. Push through the barriers. Resist the naysayers. Set your vision high and keep going. Don't give up. Let's build strong children!

Thank you.