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Congressman George Miller Delivers Stanford University School of Education Commencement Address

Miller Challenges Graduates to Demand Change in Their Schools and Demand Modern Workplace and Outlines His Vision for ESEA rewrite

WASHINGTON, D.C. –U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the senior Democrat on the Education and the Workforce Committee, today delivered the commencement address at the Stanford University School of Education (SUSE), one of the nation's leading teacher preparation programs. This is the first commencement address Miller accepted in his 37 years of public service. During the speech, Miller challenged graduates to be disrupters in their schools, to demand a modern workplace and to demand the changes their students deserve. He also outlined his vision for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and warned graduates of the dangers of letting ideology stand in the way of progress.

Below are his remarks as prepared.

Thank you so much for that wonderful welcome.

Graduation season is a time when families and students reflect on the choices they've made. Look how happy and proud you all are.

I'm trying to think back to how my parents felt on this day to see their son graduate ---with a degree in American humor. I hope they felt better when I chose law school.

I am not sure if they felt better when I chose the Congress of the United States.

As one who made all the right choices, I can't tell you how excited I am by the choices that you have made that led you to this graduation.

I am here today feeling inspired about your decision, your talents and the dynamic education environment that you will be entering.

I am also here to remind you that our nation is counting on you. --- No pressure at all!

Typically at these ceremonies graduates are told to follow their passions.

Parents, think about it --- after years of tuition, loans and grants -- now they should follow their passions!

But I don't think you are here so that after years of education and sacrifice you are now going to follow your passion --- I think your passion brought you here --- this is your passion!!

This is the first commencement speech invitation I have accepted in my nearly 40 years of public service, I did so for one reason.

The education environment that you are entering is the most dynamic and holds the most promise of sustained, meaningful reform that I have experienced since becoming a Member of Congress.

I believe this graduating class is the best equipped to meet and thrive on the challenges presented.

In communities all across our nation, there is a growing recognition that the status quo does not serve our children or our nation well.

And there is an acknowledgement that we must embrace a robust competition for ideas and solutions to the complex problems confronting our teachers, students, parents, communities, and our economy.

Your personal experience in the American education system has taught you that if you bring your talents, your skills and the education you have received here at Stanford that you will have the ability to empower a whole new generation with the opportunity to follow their passion and their dreams.

And America will be enriched.

Your experience and your education also causes you to know and to understand that the current education system in America denies too many children that opportunity.

For a long time, as a nation, we have let the averages dictate our idea of educational attainment for our schools and somehow that was good enough.

There wasn't real accountability, there weren't data systems and, frankly, there wasn't a good sense of how students were performing.

Ten years ago, we passed No Child Left Behind. And for all its flaws, No Child Left Behind blew the doors off the notion that we could allow our schools to continue in an environment without real information about how each and every student fared in school.

Schools were required, for the first time, to take some responsibility for student outcomes.

I am very proud of my involvement in passing that law.

It has permanently changed the landscape on what will and won't be acceptable for students. No Child Left Behind requires public disclosure of the performances of our schools and our students.

This disclosure prevents us from living in denial of what is happening in our schools and the negative impact on our students and our economy. And it should prevent us from committing negligence and letting a student's status by poverty, ability or race determine his or her future.

But No Child Left Behind is far from perfect, as we all know. For too many students, their education has not provided them that the critical opportunity to determine a different destiny.

This situation is not sustainable – not for students, not for communities and not for our economy. It must not be maintained -- it must be changed.

No Child Left Behind is in need of substantial reform, reforms that will enable you to be even more successful as agents of change and great educators, and I am eager to help make that happen.

So, today I want to propose a deal. You have a role to play – and that is one of a disrupter.

Being a disrupter means that you won't stand for the status quo. It means you recognize the failures and the opportunities presented by the status quo.

You won't wait for change to come. You will embrace it and you will fight for your students.

In fact, your education and experience require you to be a disrupter. --- This is not for the faint of heart.

And I have my role to play --- to swim against the tide. Not to worry – I'm up for it. I am always reminding my grandchildren that I was a very good high school competitive swimmer and over long distances.

I've been doing it for 37 years in Congress – you try that!

My job is to swim against the inertia of the status quo and create public policy that will empower and enable you to make the sustainable reforms necessary for our children and our schools to succeed.

I think you can call that being a disrupter.

The truth is that when we have had challenges that are national in scope, as we do now, it has been the disrupters who have brought the change.

In education, two disruptive moments nearly 60 years ago changed our schools, and our country, forever.

They were both in 1957.

I was in the 7th grade when the Russians launched Sputnik. I remember my math teacher coming in and showing us the picture on what I think was the cover of Life (?) magazine and saying how we all had to work harder. All I could think was, "Great, more homework."

But the Soviet's blazing past the United States space program demanded a response for the sake of our national and scientific security and America's place in the world.

In October of that same year, one month before Sputnik first took launch, nine high school students in Arkansas brought our nation's educational disparities into every living room in the country.

The Little Rock Nine integrated Central High School in Arkansas. With soldiers from the 101st Airborne by their side, those nine teenagers started what would be a long journey to full desegregation in our educational institutions.

When the Supreme Court declared in 1954 that every child in this country deserved equal access to education – and that separate but equal was not sufficient under our Constitution -- our schools changed forever.

In both of these instances of national crisis and response, our nation turned to education as the necessary response.

The first reaction to Sputnik by Congress was passage of the historic National Defense Education Act.

The second came eight years later when President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into law -- only three months after it was introduced.

Two defining moments in our nation's history both taught us the same lesson, whether leadership in space and science or in the protection of our constitution and equal protection and opportunity -- the answer was education.

And here we are now. Once again, America in need, in need of a modern health system, in need of a modern energy system and a modern infrastructure system.

And once again, education is the answer.

And yet, we are not developing the human capital that our nation needs to compete in a globalized world.

We are not preparing our students to fully participate in the changing global economy.

And poor and minority students continue to experience achievement gaps that are unacceptable and threaten our diverse American democracy.

This is a crisis. This is an emergency. This cannot be ignored any longer.

Whether we are waiting for Sputnik or waiting for Superman, I am tired of waiting.

I am tired of watching ideology delay action and lose precious time, and I am tired of watching ideology dictate policy.

Ideology will not create the education system this nation needs to meet its challenges but ideology can keep it from happening.

So, where are going to go now?

Your class is critical to leading and expanding the most dynamic reform environment any of us has experienced. You have the opportunity to finally take our education system into the 21st century.

Your graduation comes at the confluence of a recognized national need for better outcomes from our schools and the advances in our understanding of what leads to those outcomes.

This is a mission that is critical to our students, our neighborhoods and our nation. We can't wait for the incremental change.

We must act.

I say "we" because this must be a team effort – a national effort – bringing together your disruptive talents and good public policy.

Washington must respond with policy that will allow our nation and you to exploit your talents on behalf of our children and young people.

We know that some of the best schools support teaching and learning environments where learning leads to better assessments and those assessments lead back to better learning.

We are seeing evidence of efforts to create these teaching and learning environments every day.

- Over 40 states applied for Race to the Top;
- Dozens of states are working with growth models;
- 17 states and districts are leading the conversations on teacher evaluation;
- 46 states have signed on to the Common Core Standards effort being lead by the Governors and Chief State School Officers; and
- Over a dozen states are looking at parent trigger laws to ensure parents and communities have a seat at the table.

As a result, the table is being set for real, systemic change recognizing the urgency of the needs of our children, our communities and our nation.

It is being advanced by the hard work of the teachers and leaders who every day seek to make education better.

I've been waiting a long time to be a part of what you are on the brink of doing for our schools.

Some of you have already been a part of this vision in your student teaching and internships.

You did not spend your time at Stanford preparing for this challenge to be wedged into a siloed isolated classroom in a school system that didn't try to or could not figure out how to cross the bridge to the 21st century. That's not for you.

Yes, this is a tough job market but it is also a very different job market than previous graduates have encountered.

There is a growing demand for new schools, a growing demand for smart, effective teachers and a growing demand for enlightened administrators.

As a result, you need not sell cheap, or accept conditions that burden your talent and value. Schools that can't or won't keep up with the future will continue to lose market share. These demands are being made by parents and communities who want the best for their children.

Remember you are the disruptors.

Young educators across the country aren't waiting for traditional schools to change.

They are seeking out schools desiring change or joining efforts to create new schools with high quality programs meeting the needs of our kids and our communities.

You have the ability to change the architecture of our schools. The Congress has the obligation to create policy that allows this change to accelerate.

This is about a teaching environment that reflects a modern workplace, a workplace that must be created with teachers.

- A workplace that provides time for teachers to prepare and work collaboratively to develop their skills and those of their peers.
- A workplace where you can be evaluated, so that you can continually hone your craft.
- A workplace where you will have access and use of data in real time to assess how you and your students are doing.
- A workplace where you are paid for your time, your talent and your responsibilities and where you know you can advance and grow.

Your generation views the workplace very differently than your parents' or my generation.

You will be more mobile, you will be more entrepreneurial, and you will change careers.

Schools, districts, states and federal policy must reflect these shifts if students are to succeed.

This can happen; it should happen; and frankly it has to happen.

And you will chart this path.

It is this moment that brings us together, me, the policy maker working as hard as I ever have to make this modern workplace a reality for all teachers through the rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

And you, the architects of the future of America's education system.

What our schools and students need is not a mystery. Leading states and districts are showing us the future of education.

Teachers and leaders are at the center of any conversation about improving student achievement, but we know that can't happen in a vacuum.

Here's what I think needs to happen:

- 1) We need to set high standards so all students are prepared for college and the workplace.
- 2) We must hold tight on accountability for all students, but through a richer index of measures that includes growth, graduation rates and a high quality, modern assessment system.
- 3) States, districts and schools must have the flexibility to improve schools based on their student, school and community needs, whether it be extending the school day or providing wraparound services or developing a new curriculum.
- 4) We must support and demand real data-based decision making to allow the federal government to get out of the way and support a performance-based system. Performance must be transparent to communities and to parents so that they can participate in their schools and support their success.
- 5) We must give districts a better way to access funding, provide more flexibility in what can be funded at the local level, encourage community partnerships and have strong, consistent outcome measures of success.
- 6) And, most importantly, we must support a professional environment for teachers and school leaders that holds them accountable and provides the information and the resources to succeed, and lets them get back to doing what they do best – educating students.

If we do these things, we will have schools that will finally look like the 21st century. They will be able to respond to the future demands and our students and our economy will reap the benefits.

Despite the political landscape in Washington that is holding progress hostage, I remain cautiously optimistic that the reauthorization can happen this year.

Frankly, we cannot afford the alternative.

It has to happen so that we can ensure that we as a nation can deliver on the core principles of why the federal government has a role to play in education in the first place.

Sputnik and Little Rock, two moments in our nations' history, taught our nation the same lesson: if we're going to lead the world, it has to start with our schools.

Those two moments also taught us never to let ideology or the status quo get ahead of our national needs.

You have the opportunity to bring your talent, and your success to this fight.

And as someone who has been on one side of this fight for nearly 40 years, I'm going to need you, your competence and confidence, your visions, your knowledge and your experiences that you've gained from your time at Stanford if we're going to be able to win for our students.

I will be paying close attention from Washington because I know you are going to accomplish great things during your career.

I know you're going to take everything you've learned at Stanford, in your classes, from your professors and from your internships, and use all that knowledge to disrupt and then to transform education in this country.

I promise to fight for you, your schools and your students in Congress.

Today, as we honor what you've accomplished at Stanford and celebrate what you've achieved, let me be among the first to say thank you.

Thank you for the work that you will do to challenge the children you teach and the schools in which they learn. Thank you for the hours you will spend in classrooms and in our schools helping shape the future of our country.

Thank you for the lives you will change. I know you will truly make a difference.
Good luck and congratulations to all of you.

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