Let me start by telling you about one Congressman's favorite teacher.

She was my elementary school teacher. Her name was Miss Yost, and she is certainly one of the most remarkable individuals I have ever known.

Miss Yost taught in a very different environment from teachers today. She had sole responsibility for 32 children, grades 1 through 4 in a two-room school house. On her own, she found a way to simultaneously provide a good educational foundation for all of us. She kept us in line, kept the building clean and furnace stoked. She was the disciplinarian, the nurse and the babysitter.

Miss Yost has had my admiration throughout my life, first as a student, and then as an educator and now as a Member of Congress serving on the House Committee on Education and Labor.

Miss Yost and many teachers like her did it all. They provided a quality education with far fewer resources than today's classroom. It's not that there are none with the talent and commitment Miss Yost had. Rather, new and difficult obstacles have been placed between today's teachers and successful teaching.

Government regulations have eliminated the flexibility Miss Yost used to provide a wide range of services to her students. The total support of parents and the community no longer exists. The respect students had for teachers is a thing of the past.

We no longer put our teachers on a pedestal; nor do we attract the best and the brightest to the teaching profession.

Of course, I am not advocating a retreat to the past--although we could learn some lessons from the teacher in the two-room schoolhouse. Nor am I placing the responsibility for our failing education system on teachers--the problem is hardly that simple.

Rather, I would say the difficulties experienced by today's teachers are indicative of the problems with education in general.

It is no secret our schools are traveling in troubled waters. We've heard about high dropout rates, workers unable to perform basic tasks, and poor test scores compared with students of other nations. On a personal
level, many of us have at least a general sense that our children simply aren't getting the quality of education they need to succeed in life.

Concern about education quality and equal education opportunity is nothing new: Significant efforts have been made in recent decades. At the federal level, we've seen a certain amount of success come from programs directed at those with the greatest needs--programs such as Head Start, Chapter 1, the Education of the Handicapped Act, and Pell Grants.

Yet, it is clear that not only have many of the problems confronting education not been solved, they have also grown more numerous and complex. The educator's job has become more difficult as students increasingly struggle with hardships stemming from the breakdown of the family unit, the erosion of traditional values and the perils of drugs, alcohol and sexual activity. At the same time, the workplace has become more sophisticated, increasing the demand on our schools to produce better-educated students.

This leaves us with a daunting task. Our education system is failing and something needs to be done to fix it. We can't bring the needed reform by working at the margins. What is needed is nothing less than the transformation of our education system.

Let me take moment to describe what I see as the key to education progress--a commitment to excellence. To succeed, we must seek to excel. This is a message that must reach all levels. Students, teachers, parents, communities and government must demand excellence. We must demand it of ourselves and of our schools. Nothing short of the best will do.

A commitment to excellence on all levels is necessary because education is a partnership. Progress cannot come solely through government programs--although they should play an important role. We must inspire our students to demand the best of themselves, and we, in turn, must demand the best of our schools.

Parents carry a significant burden in this equation. Parents cannot rely on schools to raise their children. The value of parents who read with their children, help with homework, instill respect for teachers, foster self-confidence and responsibility, and demonstrate the benefits of a good education cannot be underestimated.

Let's make this our credo as we work to improve the nation's schools: Demand excellence.
What other basic elements are required to transform our education system? We need a national consensus and the momentum it can bring. We need resources. And, we need a specific course of action.

To a large extent, I believe, we have that consensus: In education, business as usual won't do.

Never before has public awareness of education, its problems and opportunities been higher. Momentum is growing and reform movements are underway nationwide. The education goals established by the President and the Governors are evidence of the fact that the concern and commitment are nationwide, and the capacity to develop common solutions exists.

In terms of resources, we have what we need; we're simply not using it properly. The money, personnel, services, equipment and expertise are available, but often they are not used effectively.

In part, this occurs because the federal government has erected funding barriers and limitations that make it inherently impossible for the programs to work together. This must not be allowed to continue.

Which leads us to the search for a course of action.

We all know that despite the good faith efforts of the past 10 years to improve our schools, we have failed. There is a basic reason for this failure. Our efforts have failed because they have been piecemeal. They have not been coordinated, nor have they sought to change the system within which schools and teachers operate.

America 2000, President Bush's education reform package, contains much of the meat needed to achieve our national education goals. Yet, it too is lacking the systematic, comprehensive approach needed for real success.

I recently joined with my colleagues, Reps. Ford and Kildee, to introduce legislation that provides the needed structure. Our bill is called the Comprehensive Neighborhood Schools Revitalization Act," and I believe it is the first education legislation with real potential for change I've seen since coming to Congress.

The system would be set up in the following manner: Each state would establish a panel of educators, government officials, parents, students and business leaders to develop a plan to maximize achievement for all children. Within this framework, local panels and school districts would develop their own reform efforts.
This is where we put the meat on the bones. The federal legislation would provide funding for a variety of educational initiatives at the state and local levels. Many of these come straight out of America 2000. Allowable activities would include reward activities such as merit schools, optional school choice programs, parental involvement activities, motivational activities, planning to upgrade school technology, and professional development.

This framework enables state and local governments and school districts to tailor their programs to their needs, while at the same time ensuring these efforts are coordinated. It gives the grass roots more control and helps to ensure resources are used effectively.

With this legislation, the federal government can help ensure every state, every locality and every school district buckles down to the hard work of reforming our schools to meet the education goals. The entire nation will be moving in the same direction, although individual paths may be chosen.

First, we must develop more of a Team Approach to Education.

I spoke earlier of the need for all members of the education partnership to be involved in education. We must incorporate this approach as a policy change.

Too often, the only community involvement asked is fiscal support. They have much more to contribute, however.

Members of the community and parents should be involved in the establishment of program goals, expected student performance outcomes, and measures of success. They need to feel they are an integral part of their school's operation—that they have the opportunity to make a real contribution and to help determine the direction of the education program.

Any Federal legislation should provide for meaningful roles for communities, parents and private sector involvement. And I don't just mean establishing advisory committees.

Parents should be asked about their expectations for their children. Retired citizens should be utilized as resources in the schools. Businesses should help develop the vocational and academic programs that can supply their future workforce needs. School personnel should have an opportunity to work in the private sector and gain "real life" experiences to enhance their understanding and application of the subject matter they teach. Private sector individuals should participate as mentors, teach courses or guest lecture in areas of expertise. This is only a short list of the possibilities.
Similarly, more attention should be paid to the role of the parents in some students' education problems. An intergenerational approach to solving these problems should be attempted where appropriate.

For example, during my years as an educator, I often found that if a child could not read, the parents were poor readers as well. If the child had language difficulties, the home may have been bilingual. If the child did not appreciate the value of education, the parent likely was failed by the system.

To ignore the problems of the parents diminishes the long-term effects of any program. In my schools, I found some success in combating illiteracy by bringing the parents into the process. When I entered Congress, and I worked to encourage the use of similar programs nationwide, and was successful in creating the Even Start intergenerational literacy program.

In the Even Start program, parents learn to read as well as become teachers and caretakers of their children. The growth of and demand for the program has exceeded any expectations when it was first enacted.

The second policy change would be to Encourage Comprehensive Approaches and Lift Barriers to Coordination.

The federal government is notorious for targeting funds too narrowly to be as effective as they could be.

For example, schools may receive small amounts of drug prevention money from 3 or 4 different programs, but be unable to aggregate them to fund the services of a single counselor.

In other cases, a child may be disadvantaged because of a variety of factors, but federal laws prohibit pooling funds targeted to address these problems, and schools are therefore unlikely to create a comprehensive intervention program.

Not only should barriers to coordination be removed, comprehensive approaches should be encouraged wherever possible. The current system is wasteful and duplicative and does not serve our disadvantaged students well.
Third, Education Programs Should be Performance-Oriented.

Our greatest concern is that students learn to read, write, compute, speak effectively, and so forth. Yet, the focus of our laws seems to be on how the programs are administered and run.

Instead, attention should be shifted to student performance and program improvement. We should not worry whether 15 minutes of Teacher X’s time was spent on Program Y or Program Z, or student A or student B. Congress and the federal government must get out of the business of micromanaging education. Program operators must be relieved of their paperwork burdens so they can spend their time as educators, not bureaucrats.

Likewise, we cannot assume that completion of a given number of courses or hours in class will prepare the student for advancement to the next level or the labor market. Real learning must take place before the student can advance. In addition, the school must ensure it has provided the relevant education.

These same high standards and opportunities must apply to all students, not just the college-bound as is so often the case. Success can also come in the form of placement in a job, into further training or the military. We are the only industrialized nation without a school-to-work transition program. A program of this sort could help millions of students as well as increasing U.S. economic competitiveness.

Finally, A More Reliable Data and Information Base Must Be Developed, With a Sufficient Means of Dissemination.

If we can accomplish each of the above policy changes, we must have a way of measuring, understanding and learning from our progress, and sharing that information with educators nationwide.

Currently, available data are not necessarily consistent, the measures used are different and the outcomes are not necessarily related to the context in which they will be used.

Furthermore, there is not a single clearinghouse for information. The education system can benefit from exemplary programs that have been used in youth employment. The contextual learning measures, and competency-based programs developed by the military cannot be tapped.

We are reinventing the wheel too many times to allow us to be creative, innovative or productive.
Although I have mentioned only four policy changes, it is clear that if implemented, they would mean a broad-ranging restructuring of the education system as we know it today.

Changing the current system is going to require a certain level of bravery on the part of Members of Congress. We will have to face vested interests and advocacies for individual programs who may have to be dissatisfied in the short term for the sake of long-term progress.

To shy away from these challenges would be an unforgivable mistake. There is too much at stake: The future of our children, our society and our economy all rest on our ability to work together and make the change.

In closing, I would like to take you back to the classroom.

As a former educator--and former student--I believe one of the most important lessons learned in school is appreciation for the unique qualities that make our nation great.

One of those qualities is our "can-do" attitude. When Americans put their minds to it and work together, they can tackle any problem, achieve any goal.

Any schoolchild can tell about some of this nation's special accomplishments. We created the world's first democracy; we built an economy and standard of living that are unsurpassed; we revolutionized agriculture and put a man on the moon.

After having successfully met a military challenge in the Middle East, America is facing a potentially greater danger right here at home. Our economy has weakened, the standard of living for many Americans has not grown in years, and we are losing ground to our trade competitors.

To turn this around it will take this "can do" attitude and action in several areas, but none more important than education. If we don't educate and train a greater percentage of our people to a level of excellence, then I believe we will lose our position of leadership in the world. The stakes are that high. So, let's get going.