

A close-up photograph of Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, speaking. He is looking upwards and to the left with a determined expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a light blue patterned tie. The background is a clear, bright blue sky.

# Yes we can

US president Barack Obama has delivered a huge injection of extra funding to education, writes **Dennis Van Roekel**, president of the USA's National Education Association.

Last year's election in the United States was a milestone for the country, with the American people turning out in record numbers to vote. The election of Barack Obama as president had historic significance for many reasons, not the least of which is what it means for US students and educators.

After eight years of government under George W. Bush, we now have a true friend of public education residing at the White House. During the presidential campaign, Obama expressed his commitment to funding the programs needed to transform our public schools, and this has been vividly demonstrated through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

This economic recovery bill includes about US\$130 billion for education, which is a direct result of intensive advocacy by National Education Association (NEA) members and pro-public education partners. This major infusion of education dollars into local communities—more than the entire current US Education Department budget—is a big victory for the nation's public schools. It is the greatest federal investment in education in history and a major step towards getting our economy back on track, not only because of the jobs it will save today and the new jobs it will generate in the coming months, but because it strengthens public education well into the future.

### Five-pillar plan

In a major address on March 10, Obama talked about his vision for public education in the 21st century. He unveiled a five-pillar plan involving investment in early childhood education; achieving better standards and assessments on the state level; recruiting, preparing and rewarding

outstanding teachers; promoting innovation and excellence in US schools; and providing every American with a quality higher education. The president's fiscal year 2010 budget further builds upon ARRA by investing in these key areas and expanding educational opportunities for all.

His vision for strengthening public education shows he really

by closing the achievement gaps, reducing dropout rates and improving the professional lives of our members—is just beginning. Thankfully, Obama knows that teachers and education support professionals are allies, not adversaries, in the transformation effort. NEA leaders are working with the new administration on a progressive agenda for public

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understands that education is critical to rebuilding the US economy and he isn't afraid to think big. He understands that investments like early childhood education will pay huge dividends for children and society. He believes that every student who is willing to work hard deserves an opportunity to attend college. And he realises that we need to invest in our teachers if we expect to reap rewards. His calls for improving professional development, mentoring and raising teachers' compensation based on their knowledge and skills mirror proposals advocated by the NEA.

Perhaps most importantly of all, Obama knows that educators alone can't prepare the children of the United States to succeed. He has repeatedly called for greater involvement by parents and communities in our public schools.

For teachers' unions, working with a pro-public education president presents us with a great opportunity and a responsibility. At the national level, we have a chance to accomplish some of the things we have been talking about for years. We have a responsibility to offer solutions and ideas that can transform our public schools.

As an association of educators, the real work for the NEA—transforming public education

education and, for the first time in eight years, educators have been invited to the table to lend a strong voice and play an active role in addressing these challenges.

### Critical ally

The NEA has long said that our nation's economic competitiveness depends on providing every child with an education that will enable them to compete in a global economy. In Obama, we have a critical ally and partner in creating public school systems that support student success as well as advance the profession of teaching and the work lives of educators.

Creating the schools we need for the 21st century will require a new commitment and partnership between federal, state and local governments, as well as local communities. The election of Obama put a friend of education in the White House who can help us achieve that commitment and partnership. Now we must build on our hard work and continue the momentum toward a great public school for every student. ●

**The National Education Association, with 3.2 million members, is the largest professional organisation in the United States representing teachers and other public school employees.**