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## Be selfish about improvement

I'm a middle-class gal. I live a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, complete with a home in the suburbs, two cars in the garage, and a respectable but not frightening amount of consumer debt. I can afford nice clothes, a gym membership, theater tickets, and a vacation every year, including overseas travel every now and then. I eat out several times a month and, at least as often, enjoy a nice pinot grigio while my husband quaffs a craft beer.

Mostly, I like my life. But I also live six blocks from the poorest neighborhood in Detroit, and I am keenly aware that the quality of my life is diminished by the quality of life for those nearby, who live in an area of high poverty and little hope. I don't think that's a selfish thought but a realistic calculation that the quality of my life hangs in the balance until their lives improve — and I want their lives to improve. If I was one of the Warren Buffett super rich perhaps I could skate along with little worry about how my poor neighbors are faring. But I believe that my economic prospects are in jeopardy as long as their economic futures are uncertain.

Middle-class families who covet their excellent schools are foolish to believe that providing a good education only for their own children is sufficient to secure their child's future. Nobody wins in this game if anyone loses. And, right now, too many are losing.

Protecting the middle class means securing a sound economic future for everyone. And nothing is more basic to improving someone's economic future than ensuring that they begin with an excellent education. Failing to guarantee that in our poorest neighborhoods will ultimately threaten the middle class as much as it hurts people in low-income brackets.

That means the middle class should be fighting like the devil to ensure that every child of poverty has access to an excellent education every hour of every day. Stop what we're doing now and figure out exactly what we'd have to do if we were really intentional about wanting every poor child to have a decent education.

Here's where I'd start:

- Staff high-poverty schools with our best teachers and principals. Have those teachers work just four hours a day in front of children and spend the other four hours every day working with colleagues to analyze what's working — and what's not — and to develop improved lessons to support a standards-based curriculum. Provide an instructional coach for every 20 teachers to ensure that every teacher is on top of her game. Evaluate teachers on the growth of learning among their students, and ensure that those teachers share what they know with colleagues.
- Devote at least 90 minutes a day to literacy in the early grades to ensure that children can read at grade level by 3rd grade.
- Provide at least two healthy and delicious meals a day for every child and plenty of daily physical exercise through recesses and P.E. classes.
- Make the school the helpful hub of a child's life by ensuring that local mental health and counseling services for children and their families are available at the school. Let professionals from the appropriate fields focus on these important tasks so teachers can focus on educating students.
- Teach family members how to support their child's education. Provide opportunities for family members to assist at school, when necessary teaching them what they need to know to be an involved and supportive parent and providing transportation to enable them to visit school when their presence is requested.

Ensuring a decent education for poor children does not mean doing business the way we've always done it. To achieve change requires making changes. What's frustrating to me about our failure to move faster on closing the gaps is that I'm not convinced that we're really trying all that hard to do it.

Protecting the middle class means boosting those who live on the fringes of society. So, if you won't deliver a high-quality education to poor children to improve their lives, how about doing it because it will improve my life and maybe yours too? — JR