

'First Thoughts: President Obama on 'Education Nation'

In interview with TODAY's Lauer, President Obama endorses longer school years, will train 10,000 new math and science teachers, says daughters would not get as good an education in DC public schools right now as in private. Our poll finds Americans are also pessimistic about the state of public schools... Obama derides GOP "Pledge" as "irresponsible," "not serious." ... The empathy myth: it doesn't matter when unemployment is at 10%. ... Dems' Big 10 problem. ... redistricting shakes out ... VCI drops to -40 ... Profiling PA-11.

From NBC's Chuck Todd, Mark Murray, Domenico Montanaro, and Ali Weinberg

***** President Obama on Education Nation:** The president sat down with NBC's Matt Lauer for a live half-hour interview on TODAY talking about education as NBC's "Education Nation" kicks off. He endorsed the idea of longer school years, gave his standard answer on unions needing to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, said the administration will launch an effort to train 10,000 new math and science teachers, and he gave a blunt answer on why he and the first lady chose private school for his daughters. Asked by a woman from Florida if he thinks Sasha and Malia would get as good an education in a public school as at an "elite" private school like the one he's sending them to, Obama responded, "I'll be blunt with you, the answer is 'no' right now. The DC public school system is struggling."

***** Obama hits GOP "Pledge" as "irresponsible," "not serious":** On non education-related items, the president made his first comments on the Republicans' Pledge to America. He called extending the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans an example of Republican's "irresponsible policies." He hit Republican leadership for wanting to spend \$700 billion on the tax cuts, but only proposing \$16 billion in spending cuts in the pledge. He called that "not serious." He really tried to draw a fine-line distinction between Republican leaders and Republican/GOP-leaning independent voters. ... He also said his chief of staff Rahm Emanuel "will have to make a decision quickly.... Running for mayor of Chicago is a serious enterprise."

***** Empathy doesn't matter when unemployment is 10%:** The president also addressed this issue of whether or not he needs to be more empathetic, whether or not he needs to feel Americans' pain more. He expressed frustration – that he feels it "acutely" -- that the

economy hasn't turned around yet. And he may have given his boilerplate response that, "The fact of the matter is as long as unemployment is as high as it is... people are going to be hurting. Even if they think I know they're hurting, they want to know when am I going to do something concrete that allows them to pay their bills, their house..." And that basically sums up the entire backdrop for this election. While pundits looking to get into the Washington buzzstream with the next best nugget of analysis have been pushing these notions of style and messaging, the fact remains that we can talk about all that until we're blue in the face, but with unemployment at 10%, none of it matters. A lot of this empathy talk got brought up again when former President Bill Clinton made the interview rounds last week. As [one of us observed last week](#), Clinton is enjoying quite the renaissance of late, with some Democrats and pundits urging Obama to tap into Clinton's I-feel-your-pain magic. But CNBC's John Harwood made an important point in the [New York Times](#) yesterday: In recent U.S. history, no American president's party has fared that well during tough economic times. "Despite President Dwight D. Eisenhower's celebrated World War II record, voters didn't 'like Ike' enough to keep his fellow Republicans from losing 48 House seats amid the 1958 recession. For all his talents, Mr. Clinton watched his party lose control of both the House and Senate in the 1994 midterm election, in which economic weakness was one of many factors. 'We have a controlled experiment,' observed Stan Greenberg, one of Mr. Clinton's pollsters, downplaying the significance of Mr. Obama's empathic skills. 'Clearly Bill Clinton had the ability to connect emotionally. He got slaughtered in 1994.'"

***** The Dems' Big 10 problem:** One of the secrets to Barack Obama's success in 2008 (and the Democratic Party's performance in 2006) was his (their) performance in the Midwest; In 2008, Obama won every single Big 10 state, racking up 117 electoral votes (compared with John Kerry's 86 in these same states). But in the upcoming midterms, Democrats are facing the prospect of some big losses in the Midwest. If the election were held today, Dems -- according to polls -- would lose the races for both governor and Senate in Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, as well as the Senate race in Indiana and the gubernatorial contest in Michigan. Ouch. (The one Big 10 exception here: Minnesota, where Dems might have the edge in the governor's race, but even there some unexpected House races are starting to move onto the radar.)

So it should be no surprise that Obama is heading to Big 10 country this week. On Tuesday, he travels to Madison, WI, to participate in a DNC rally. On Wednesday, he holds an economic event in Des Moines, IA. And Vice President Biden gets into the act, too, with a rally on Tuesday at Penn State. Demographically, when you look at these national polls, check out how the president is doing with whites 50+, not just seniors, this is the demographic that the president and Dems are struggling with and these are the dominant voting demographic in these Midwestern states.

*** **Obama's day:** Before the president heads to Big 10 (+2) country tomorrow, he sat down at 8:00 am ET this morning for a live interview on "TODAY" as part of NBC's discussion this week on education, "Education Nation." Then, at 12:10 pm, he hosts a conference call with college journalists. At 1:45 pm, Obama signs the Small Business Jobs Act into law. Per CNBC's Eamon Javers, small business owners who will benefit from the law will join the president at this signing event. Finally, Obama departs in the early evening for New Mexico, where tomorrow he'll hold an economic event before traveling to Wisconsin for the DNC rally.

*** **The changing map, redistricting starts to shake out:** Over the weekend, DC-based Election Data Services released a report for the National Conference of State Legislatures on what the latest Census data will mean for redistricting. What the study revealed, according to [Politico's Cohen](#), was that Florida's influence will be growing. "Florida would gain two House seats and New York would lose two seats. ... Missouri will lose a House seat instead of Minnesota. ... Texas is expected to gain four House seats and Ohio likely will lose two seats. ... [S]ix other states each would gain one seat: Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah and Washington. Eight states would each lose one seat: Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. In addition to the Florida and New York changes."

*** **"Education Nation":** More on education, we have a new NBC/WSJ poll on the public's opinion of the American education system. The headline: Americans are pretty pessimistic about the nation's public schools: 58% believe K-12 public schools either need major changes or a complete overhaul (that's up four points from a 2001 NBC/WSJ survey); just 5% think the schools work pretty well; and another 36% think that minor changes are needed. What's more, when asked to give America's public schools a letter grade, a

combined 70% give them either a C (45%) or a D (25%). However, when asked to grade the public schools in their community, the public wasn't as pessimistic -- a combined 42% give them a C (27%) or a D (15%), while a combined 45% gave them an A (13%) or a B (32%). So there's a difference between attitudes about America's public school system, and views of public schools in their own communities.

***** The problems and the solutions:** Also in the poll, 53% cited elected officials as part of the problem with the public education system, 50% said parents, 41% cited teacher unions, 36% said principals and administrators, and 30% said teachers. And who is part of the solution? Per the survey, 48% said teachers, 29% said principals and school administrators, 25% said teachers unions, and 24% said parents. The best ways to improve the system: 75% said recruiting and retaining better teachers would be a big improvement, 64% said that of reducing class sizes, 54% said that of requiring teachers to pass a competency test, 52% said that of requiring passing standardized tests to move to the next grade, 48% said that of spending more money on education, 39% said that of allowing students and parents greater flexibility in school choice, 39% said that of introducing national education standards, 30% said that of providing financial rewards to the best teachers, and 29% said that of increasing the number of charter schools. Finally, according to our poll, 65% said they would be willing to pay higher federal taxes to improve America's public schools.

***** Heads up for Tuesday:** The rest of the NBC/WSJ poll (on President Obama's standing and the upcoming midterms) will be released on Tuesday.

***** VCI update:** Our current Voter Confidence Index now stands at – 40 for the month of September. For more, go to VCI.msnbc.com

***** 75 House races to watch:** PA-11: The Democratic nominee is 13-term incumbent Paul Kanjorski, who was first elected in 1984. The GOP nominee is Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta, who was the party's nominee for this seat in '02 and '08. Obama won 57% in this district -- which includes Scranton and Wilkes-Barre -- while Kerry won 53% in 2004. As of June 30, Kanjorski had more than \$1 million in the bank, while Barletta had nearly \$237,000. Kanjorski voted for the stimulus, cap-and-trade, and health care. Both Cook and Rothenberg rate the contest as a Toss Up.

***** More midterm news:** In California, a [LA Times/USC poll finds](#) Jerry Brown up by five points among likely voters (49%-44%) and

Barbara Boxer up eight (51%-43%)... In Florida, former Dem Congressman Robert Wexler endorsed Charlie Crist... In Ohio, John Kasich is ahead by four points among likely voters (49%-45%), while Rob Portman is up 15, according to the [Cincy Enquirer/Ohio Newspaper Poll](#).

*** **A programming note:** Be sure to tune into MSNBC tonight at 10:00 ET for the debut of the “The Last Word” hosted by Lawrence O’Donnell. Tonight, O’Donnell interviews Vice President Joe Biden.