

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

**NEA Friend of Education
Orlando, Florida
July 5, 1999**

**The National Education Association's
Friend of Education Award Presentation to the First Lady**

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's Acceptance Remarks

Orlando, Florida

July 5, 1999

Thank you. I am so pleased to be here with all of you. And I am extraordinarily honored to receive this very important and prestigious award from an organization that stands for the best in education, and therefore stands for the best in America. I am honored to be the 1999 Friend of Education, and I am honored to be with so many of you—thousands of you who prove every day that you are friends of education and friends of the children of America. And there isn't any better way to celebrate the 4th of July weekend than to be right here standing up for public education and America's children.

This, your 137th annual convention, chose as its theme, "Destination 2000: Quality Public Education for All." That is not only the goal of the NEA—that is and should be the goal for all Americans. I want to recognize your leadership that is helping to chart the way towards your goal, starting with your president. He has been an outspoken and passionate advocate for America's teachers, and a tireless crusader for the school reforms that we know are so vital if the goal of providing quality education for all is to be met. And so let me publicly thank Bob Chase for all he has done on behalf of education.

I also want to mention that at the Mental Health Conference last month, Bob came forward with a very innovative public/private partnership that combines the resources and expertise of the NEA with EchoStar Communications Corporation, the Dish Network, Future View, and the Learning First Alliance to provide 1,000 satellite TV dishes to schools and the education programming necessary to try to help our schools and our children be safer. That's the kind of groundbreaking work that we have come to expect from his leadership.

I also want to thank your vice president, Reg Weaver, and your secretary treasurer, Dennis Van Roekel. I want to thank Sheridan Pearce, and I want to thank all of you, starting with the Lamar County Education Association that nominated me for this award, and all of you who every day serve on the front lines, caring for our young people, giving them the skills and confidence they need to thrive in the 21st Century and to fulfill their God-given potential.

I know that in your ranks you include classroom teachers, college faculty, education support personnel, bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, counselors, building and grounds keepers, psychologists, and even students preparing to become teachers. All of you together hold the future of our children in your hands. And I am grateful for what you do every day.

I also want to thank you for the conference that you held during this convention that stressed the important and changing role of teachers in moving toward school improvement and came up with ideas for collaboration, risk taking, and personal responsibility. At every turn, you

have been pushing the envelope of reform and looking for ways to make the ideas that sound good in speeches, or appear in papers, realities in classrooms across our nation.

So we may come here today from many different parts of America, but we understand fully that as we mark this very important Independence Weekend, our greatest task is to make sure that the American Dream stays alive and vibrant for every American. And those of us who understand what it will take in the 21st Century to make that dream live on, know we must do everything in our power to make a quality public education a reality for every single American today.

I want to thank you for your partnership for the last six-and-a-half years with the Administration. Through your hard work and the millions of people you represent, we can claim numerous victories. We have opened the doors to college wider than they have ever been before. Some of our most troubled public schools at the beginning of this decade are now models of achievement and hope. Across the board, achievement scores are up for reading, math, and science. And the SAT scores are now at their highest level in two decades. And you, more than anyone, know that we cannot rest on the accomplishments that we have seen come to fruition because of the hard work of so many. We know that we cannot rest until we close the achievement gap between the well-off and the poor. We cannot rest when there are still too many schools failing our children and literally falling apart before our eyes. We cannot rest when too many teachers still do not have the support they need or the respect that they deserve.

So as you gather to set your priorities for this next year, I know that you are asking the toughest possible questions that need to be asked about how we chart our future for public education. How do we make sure that all students, all teachers, all schools meet the highest possible standards? How do we ensure that students receive educations that lift up their aspirations and ambitions? How do we support the changes, the reforms, and the new practices that many of you have pioneered?

I'd like to talk for just a few minutes about some of the ways that I think all of us who are Friends of Education should be working to fulfill the promise that you have established of providing that quality education. Let me start by saying that I know there are some who believe that vouchers are the way to improve our public schools; I believe they are dead wrong. There is simply no evidence that vouchers improve student achievement. Now we've been experimenting with vouchers in some jurisdictions, haven't we? And from those experiments—and some have gone on for a couple of years—we've found no evidence that any objective analysis could prove that these have made any difference in student achievement. But what they have done is to divert much-needed public funds for the few and have weakened the entire system.

Now since 1983, I have been a vigorous advocate of reforming and fixing schools that do not work. And I have taken positions on behalf of improved accountability and higher standards. And in those 16 years, I have seen that we do know how to turn around failing schools. What we have too often lacked is the staying power and the will to deliver on what we know would make a difference. But if we are to make that difference, then we have to make a

solemn vow never to abandon our public schools or the children who attend them, but to instead redouble our efforts to pursue strategies that we know can make a difference. Because in every school district in America, you and I know, there are schools that are working against the most amazing odds. They are taking children who are poor and poorly prepared and are getting results.

We know a lot more today than we knew five or, certainly, 10 years ago about what we need to do to marshal the resources to make every school that successful. So let's build up our schools—not tear them down. And let's make sure that everyone has the same goal in mind—to make our public schools and our public school students the best in the entire world.

Now how do we do that? Well, first and foremost, we have to expect every single child to succeed and we have to hold every one of them to high academic standards. There should be no exceptions, no excuses, to our solemn commitment that every child can learn; every child deserves to be challenged, to have their imaginations sparked. And yet we know that that is not just the task in our schools; it has to start in our homes with parents and family members who value education. And we need a culture that cares more about what a child learns than what kind of sneakers he wears, and environments in which effort is rewarded and instant gratification is put in its proper place.

Now in order to achieve our hope that every child can learn, we have to be ready to provide the resources and the support to enable educators to help those students reach those high expectations. And there isn't a more important element than the quality of a child's teacher. As General John Stanford, the late superintendent of the Seattle system that so many of us admired—we will miss him for years to come—he used to say that, "The victory is in the classroom." And he understood, as a retired military leader, that that meant that the teachers in the classroom needed the power and authority to lead and the resources to be able to give their children what they know they needed.

I've been privileged in the last 16 years, first in Arkansas and then throughout the country, to meet with and travel to countless schools and to visit with, by now, thousands of teachers. And I know that the vast majority of our teachers are dedicated and qualified professionals, but they are often not given the support they need. How many of you have ever had to reach into your own pocket to buy classroom supplies? So the second thing we've got to do is make sure the teachers have the resources they need.

We're facing a critical teacher shortage—we're going to have to recruit more teachers. But I agree with the NEA president that there's not only a teacher shortage, there's a respect shortage and a salary shortage as well. There is no way in today's complicated, information-overdrive world that we're going to get and keep those of you in the teaching profession to carry on the tradition of public education, unless you receive the salaries that your important work deserves. From my perspective, we have to look for ways of making sure the public understands that the task you are being asked to carry forward is the most important way we can keep faith with the next generation.

Now we're going to have to recruit more teachers. I agree with the President's proposal that we expand the already successful Troops to Teachers program. We should also provide loan forgiveness to new teachers committed to teaching in hard-to-serve areas. But we cannot lower the standards in this recruitment drive, and I am very much in agreement with the proposal that states be required to phase out emergency certification and improve state teacher certification systems. But then once we get the teachers that we so desperately need, we can't just open the door to the classroom, shut it and leave them there unprepared for the challenges they face with nowhere to turn for help.

Too often, you know so well, the least experienced teachers are assigned to the most difficult schools and the most difficult students. That's a disservice to young teachers and their students. And therefore it should be no surprise that one out of every three new teachers leaves the first year, and in some urban areas it's one out of every two. We're going to have to help our young—or maybe not so young but newly minted—teachers get their footing. To do that we've got to make sure that they teach in fields that they are prepared to teach in; that we not give, right off the bat, the toughest assignments to such young teachers; that we improve and extend teacher preparation programs and support mentoring, coaching, and peer assistance—things that NEA has pioneered. We also have to provide quality, ongoing professional development, not the one-day, one-shot workshops that are too often the case. I also think that teachers need the time to prepare their courses, consult with their peers about the strategies that work, and be recognized and rewarded for your knowledge and your skills.

Now, as part of the overall education proposals that the President and the Administration are promoting, we are including a proposal that states and school districts ensure that every child is taught by a fully qualified teacher and that the federal government would expand the kind of resources that could be available for high quality professional development opportunities, including—and I would have to be in this category as well—including more specialized training to use technology in the classrooms. There are so many of my friends who are teachers that are the first to admit, like so many of us who are parents, that we cannot keep up with the technology that our children are able to master. And so our teachers need more support and opportunities to do that.

We should also allow teachers to pursue advanced certification through the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. I have worked with this issue for more than a decade, and I am very pleased that the Administration is providing for 100,000 more teachers over the next 10 years to become master teachers. It's an important step in ensuring we have the highest quality professionalism in the teaching profession that the public will recognize and reward.

Now we've been talking about teachers a lot in the national discussion, but we're also going to have to take a hard look at student responsibility as well. Because it is not just enough to try to move one part of the education equation, we have to look at all the component parts, and our students are going to have to be given a very strong message. It's the kind of message my father gave my brothers and me when we were growing up, and that was that school was our work. We were expected to do as well as we could. Yet somewhere we kind of got a mixed

message from our culture about the importance of education, both generally and in certain of our ethnic and racial groups, and we need to start with a very clear and unambiguous message—that it is the job of children to learn. It is not only something that they should be doing for themselves, it is something they owe their families and their country. And if we send that message, I think it will break through to families and it will break through to students. And one of the ways we're ending that is by calling for an end to social promotion.

Now I know that this is still controversial in some quarters. But I can only state that it is so unfair, and we really do cheat our children if we continue to promote them to the next grade if they don't have the necessary skills and knowledge to do the work required. But we also do them a terrible disservice if we do set that bar of achievement higher and then we don't provide the help and resources needed to enable them to catch up. You know, when I came in earlier, this year's National Teacher of the Year was addressing you, and I particularly like the words that Andrew Baumgartner has said about the joy he receives in teaching. He says it comes when "I look into the face of a young child and watch confusion turn to concentration, concentration to surprise, and finally surprise into the pride of accomplishment." Well, too often we stop at confusion, and we've got to do more to give every child the chance to reach the pride of accomplishment.

That means we need extended learning time. That means we need after-school and summer programs. That means we need smaller classroom sizes. I believe, and I can see that many of you do as well, that reducing class size is one of the most critical investments we can make, not only in our children's future, but in our teachers' ability to succeed. Too many teachers have to spend more time keeping order, dealing with personal problems, trying to understand what one child out of 30 or 35 needs, than maintaining high academic standards for the entire classroom. We also now have evidence. We have the evidence that backs up our anecdotal or our intuitive feeling. Studies like the recent Project Star in Tennessee confirm what parents and teachers have always known—that students do learn better in small class sizes with good teachers, particularly in the early grades. They are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to excel academically and go on to college than their peers in overcrowded classrooms. And we have also learned from these studies that minority students, in particular, benefit from the greater personal attention they receive in smaller classes. So I'm very pleased that the Congress voted last year to reduce classroom sizes in the early grades and to begin to hire more teachers at the end of this session. And now there are those who are challenging the funding for the next installment to be sure that we get the teachers in the classroom. So we have to be vigilant and we have to make sure that the idea of 100,000 new teachers is actually translated into the funding necessary to bring that about.

Now some people have said to me, when I argue strongly for smaller class size, that they are well aware of classrooms here around the United States, and other countries, where very large class sizes don't make any difference. Well, that may be all well and true. But lots of us have firsthand experience that our children are coming to school with a lot more problems than they had a generation ago. We also know, as a friend of mine said, that with the advent of 24-hour information, particularly with the television and the Internet, it is harder to maintain a child's attention. One friend said that she stands in front of that classroom and she looks at these

children, and she can just see this sort of mental remote control button being pushed as her students are looking for more entertaining channels than learning math or conjugating sentences. And so we have to do everything we can to get that personal attention that only an adult with a group of children can hold if the numbers are small enough.

We also have to do more about the sizes of some of our schools—they have gotten too big and there are too many children who feel anonymous from the start of the school year to the end of it. I was recently Principal for a Day at a school in Queens, New York. I was at a junior high school, and that school in Ozone Park was built for 1,500 students, and today houses over 2,000 students. And the day I visited they were putting in mobile classrooms so they could add 500 more by next September. Now these were youngsters of the junior high age—need I say any more? Not only that, they had 27 or 28 different languages, many were first generation immigrants, many came from struggling homes, many the children of single parents. These children I met were impressive and well spoken, but there was just such a crush of them that the teachers I spoke with about what it was like teaching there kept saying to me, “I wish I had more time with each of my students.” So we need to do more to try bring down the size of our schools, especially in areas where there are a lot of other problems that have to be addressed. We need to do more with the schools within schools idea to see what potential they hold. And we have to provide more funds to modernize crumbling schools, and build more schools where schools are needed.

You know, this is a problem all across America—in cities, in suburbs, and rural communities. And surely in this time of unprecedented prosperity in America, we can build and modernize our schools for the next century. I’m as delighted as every American when the DOW climbs, first over 10,000 and then over 11,000. But we have too many schools that are not wired for computers; we have too many others where the plaster on the ceiling is falling on the heads of the children and teachers. Let’s celebrate our prosperity by making a commitment that our schools will be worthy of the children they serve now and into the future.

And we’ll need your help to make that happen. The President is going back to Congress for the third year in a row to push for school construction legislation, and I hope that we can persuade the Congress that this is an urgent priority.

And while we are creating safer conditions for learning, we also have to make sure that our schools are safe. I want to thank the NEA and many of you for the work you did in your schools and in your communities in the wake of the tragedy of Littleton. You know all too well that too many children bring guns to school, too many children believe that violence and aggression is the way to solve problems, and we’re going to have to take every possible effort to make our schools safe. I know that you’ve really talked a lot about that in your conference, and I want to thank you for your partnership with the Administration, with private sector partners, and with others—because teachers and principals need help. Everyone who works in a school—from the custodians, or the counselors, or the teacher’s aids—everyone needs help in knowing how to target those children who need extra help and make sure they get it; to diffuse difficult situations; to provide cooling off periods; and to remove from schools those students who are disruptive and are disrupting the learning of others.

Our schools need more help from our parents and our communities, and we also need more social workers and counselors who are trained to see the early warning signs in the schools. I would also like to see nation-wide hotlines where students, and even teachers, can make referrals, anonymously if necessary, to try to bring attention to those students who are on the brink of homicidal or suicidal activity. And then we have to do everything possible to keep guns out of the hands of children, and we need to stand firm on behalf of the sensible gun control legislation that passed the Senate and then was watered down in the House. It does not make sense for us at this point in our history to turn our backs on the reality that there are too many guns and too many children have access to those guns—and we have to act to prevent that.

And let me also pledge my support to you in continuing an effort that I have been involved in for many years to reach out to parents and other adults so that they understand the importance of the early years of development and how critical they are to successful learning later on. You know, a parent is a child's first teacher, and we have to do more to get that message out to every parent. It is incredibly important that every parent here—Secretary Riley has said on many occasions—that if family members would read to their children just 20 or 30 minutes a day, it would literally revolutionize American education. So let me ask you to join in that effort to convince everyone you can reach about the importance of reading. And let me also ask you to stand with me in pushing for universal access to quality, affordable preschool programs for every child. And that includes Head Start, home visitations, high quality child care, early Head Start—whatever it takes to enable working parents to know that their children are well-cared for and are being well-prepared for school.

I also hope that you will continue to stand behind the charter school/public school movement, because I believe that parents do deserve greater choice within the public school system to meet the unique needs of their children. I recently, a few years ago, gave a commencement at a school in Washington, D.C., that has very selective admissions criteria. And the students there know that when they go there they are going to have to take much harder classes, they are going to have to study Latin, and they really are going to have to apply themselves. And every year the school system and the application process had hundreds more students applying than they could possibly accommodate in that one school. And I said to the people in the school and in the school system, "Why don't you start another school like that?" Because clearly these students and their parents want to be held accountable for this higher curricular standard.

Well, slowly but surely, we're beginning to create schooling opportunities through the public school charter system that are providing those kinds of options for parents and students—raising academic standards, empowering educators. And I invite educators to be at the forefront of this. Because I know that the NEA has already helped to create a number of charter schools. And I'm very pleased that you have done this, because I think when we look back on the 1990s, we will see that the charter school movement led by experienced, committed, expert educators will be one of the ways we will have turned around the entire public school system.

I also want to commend you for your partnerships with businesses and other private sector employers, because I know how important their critical role is in supporting our public schools. The kind of support that businesses should give goes to the very heart of knowing that this is where their future workforce will come from, and this is where they have to be playing an important role. I also hope that we will continue to do all that we can to help families to balance their work and family/parenting responsibilities. We still have too many families that have to make the wrong choice between caring for their children and bringing in that income, they don't even get to come to the parent/teacher conferences. And then there becomes a kind of cycle of indifference that sets in; they can't participate, therefore they withdraw, therefore they seem like they don't care. We need businesses to understand that they need to support parents in supporting their children's schools and teachers.

So there's a lot ahead of us that you'll be voting on and considering and talking about at this conference, and already have during the last several days. But I am very optimistic about the future of public education, because I think that word is finally beginning to spread—that we have the best schools, the smartest kids that you can find anywhere in the world. What we haven't done is to make sure that that is available to all of our children. That is your goal; that is your mission. And as we close this 4th of July weekend, there isn't any more important mission, in terms of its critical role in creating the America that will be here a hundred years from now.

Just imagine, a hundred years from now as we close the 21st Century, the NEA will be meeting somewhere, maybe in Cyberspace, and you'll be thinking both about the future challenges you face and you'll be looking back and thinking about what the past century looked like. I am very hopeful that not just at that very long date ahead of us, but in the years to come, the commitment to public education that marks the United States as unique will be reinvigorated, will be better supported, and will produce results for our children in every corner of our land. I will do all that I can, working with you to make that happen. And I will do all that I can, speaking on your behalf to the broader public, to make sure that everyone in America understands that we have a stake in the success of public education.

Some of you have been very interested in the work that the President has done and that I and others have tried to help him with, and the peace process in Northern Ireland. But I will never forget, on one of my trips to Belfast, meeting with a group of citizens and hearing about their difficulties, being told that it was the first time there had been any convening of people from both communities in a single room sitting down and talking about the issues that all of us worry about around our kitchen tables. It was important for the Catholic and Protestant women there to hear that each of them would often say a silent prayer when their husband or their son went off to work or out the door to play. It was important for each of them to see each other with human eyes unveiled by centuries of distrust. And one of the participants said, "But you know, Mrs. Clinton, our biggest obstacle is that our children have never gone to school together. They've always been separate systems. They've never learned to play together, to learn together, to work together, to build a better future together." And she went on to say, "You know, one of the great gifts that America has is that you've educated everybody together."

I believe that what she said should be heard by every American. Because sometimes our debates about reforming our schools and our public education system lose sight of that fundamental reality—that undergirding our democracy is public education—an idea that America has invested in and nurtured, and which does very well in most places for most children. One only has to look at how well the United States is positioned today. Our economy is booming, we are demonstrating to the world—from Belfast to Pristina, the Middle East to Africa—what it takes for a very diverse society to be successful. And, yes, we still have problems and we have flaws, but there is no place I'd rather be than right here thanking you for what you've done to help make America as great as it is and will be.

Thank you all very much.