

# Hillary Rodham Clinton

Keynote Address

Conference on Adult Basic Skills and the Kansas Work Force

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Sometimes when I come to places to address a group like this, I like to imagine in my mind what else might be going on in Kansas today. What other meetings are being held and what other subjects are being discussed? And if we were to go up in a great big hot air balloon together (which is always appropriate for these occasions), and look down over the whole state and see everything that was happening, all the meetings that were being held and the caucuses and other civic events, and then ask ourselves, which of these would stand the test of time, which of these could make any difference whatsoever in real peoples' lives in five, ten, fifteen or twenty years, certainly the subject matter of this conference today should lead us to say that this is such a meeting. That bringing together people from around the state with varying backgrounds to look at the results of what I thought was an excellent report, and to think through what it means to talk about training, educating, readying people, Kansans, for the work force addresses absolutely critical issues. And depending upon how the questions at stake are answered, both collectively by all of us who are here as we take action together, and individually in each of our lives, this meeting could have a very big role in determining what kind of future exits, not only in Kansas but across this country. So as I'm up here hovering above this state, I would have to guess that this meeting could, if it leads to action, be one of those that will make a difference in the next years.

Part of the reason that's so is because we are finally beginning to link up all the pieces of what has to be the paramount social domestic agenda for our country. And that is how do we raise children from the very beginning until they are productive citizens and all of the pieces and all of the institutions that have a role to play in that, have to be held more accountable than we have been holding them in the last decades.

In order to understand, for me, why it is we are finally at a point where we are willing to talk publicly about what is happening in our children's lives, and what on earth difference that makes in terms of what happens in the businesses that are represented around this room and in this state, you have to get a little historic context. Because part of the dilemma we are struggling with in our country is pushing ourselves through what amounts to a cultural transition. As we literally move from the post World War II United States, when we stood dominate militarily, economically and politically, into the new world that we, in large measure, helped to create, we find, ironically, we will not be competitive within that new world if we don't tend to our problems at home, and particularly the problems affecting our children. If you look at what this world was like in the last forty years after the Second World War, there's no argument as to what country really was dominate. But if you begin to look at what was happening, starting at the early 1970s, as countries that once had been our allies, and countries that had been our enemies, and countries that didn't even exist twenty or thirty years ago burst on to the global economic market and begin competing with us, it is clear the United States was ill prepared to continue leading in a world that it had largely midwived into existence. Because we took for granted our institutions, we took for granted our position, and as our own internal conditions began to change, as the family structure changed, as our businesses changed, as our schools changed, we found we were unready to meet the new challenges.

Finally, I think we have a consensus around the country that we have a problem. What we do not have is a consensus about yet, nor leadership to help develop that consensus, is how we are going to address that problem. And what I hope you will take from this conference is some understanding of the depth of the problem, a commitment to addressing it at least in one state, and, through the states as laboratories, knitting together some national solutions.

I want to speak specifically about a proposal that comes from the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, a creature of the National Center on Education and the Economy, and a group that took an in-depth look at how well we were preparing our young people to be competitive with their compatriots around the world. In the course of doing the research for the Commission's report, we interviewed over 2,000 business and political leaders and ordinary folks in three continents: Europe, Asia and North America. And we asked them questions about how their education systems were preparing young people, how their businesses were organized, how competitive they thought they were, what kind of social support government gave to business to be competitive, how business and education worked together.

The results of that survey served as the basis for the report called *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* In fact, it was referenced in the Kansas Inc. report that was handed out today. And the report poses very dramatically the question whether we will be a nation of high skills and, therefore, demand high wages in the international marketplace or whether we will continue to deskill our work, expect less of our students than is expected of students in competitive countries and generally be satisfied with a lower standard of living, although nobody made that choice. There was never an election held and nobody ran for office saying, "I choose low wages. Everybody who's for me line up over here." That has never been a choice that has been given to the American public, but it is the choice that we have made day after day for the last two decades.

And why have we made that choice? Partly because we have refused to see the reality of what was happening economically around us, and partly because we have so many problems in this country figuring out how to work together. We thrive on management and labor conflict, on business and government conflict, on business and schools problems. We thrive on adversary, and, as a lawyer, I can say I make a living on people who thrive on adversarial relationships. And yet it is part of the American character, we do not like to be organized. We do not want to have some great, grand approach to solving our problems, and so we figure out that we'll just muddle our way through, and because of good old American know how we will figure out what needs to be done, and we will be competitive. The problem is that in a world where others are organized to beat us economically, that have coherent systems of education and employment and training, that have governments and businesses that support the common enterprise of creating higher paying, higher skilled jobs for the people, muddling through may not be the answer that gets us where we need to be. And to that end, this commission has made some very specific recommendations that I want briefly to describe to you.

The first is that every youngster by the age of sixteen should be able to demonstrate a basic level of competency in the skills we expect from sixteen-year-olds and earn what we at the Commission call a Certificate of Initial Mastery. Now stating that may not sound revolutionary, but when the report came out in June of 1990, it was very controversial. Because if you examined the recommendation, what it says is that people who go to schools in Kansas, or Arkansas or Alaska ought to come out at basically the same place by the age of sixteen. That means that local control can still exist, but it has to exist in a context of uniformly high standards. I spent years in Arkansas traveling around, going to schools, talking to educators as my husband and I invested much of our time and effort in trying to improve our schools. And I was struck in the early 1980s when we began this, how people would, with a straight face, argue to me that they had a right to teach whatever algebra they wanted to teach in their town and nobody at the state should tell them what that should be. I would always sort of scratch my head and say, "You mean algebra in Little Rock is different than algebra in New York," and they would say, "Well, if we want it to be, that's what local control is." Well the problem with taking local control at that level, where there are no standards by which we judge how well

education is being delivered, is we no longer live in a society whose boundaries are determined by Little Rock, or Arkansas or Kansas. Whether or not our kids know algebra is going to determine how successful they are, with kids sitting in classrooms in Taipei, Tokyo and Berlin. That is the reality in which we are living. And if we do not make up our minds that we are intent upon ensuring that everyone of our youngsters achieves a basic level of competency, we will continue to condemn many of those same youngsters to a life of second class opportunity. In order to get where we need to be, to have this standard, there is a lot of work that has to be done. It is not easy waking up in a country as diverse as we are, with our history of local control, and the very firm belief that I, as a parent, have some say on what my daughter learns, and say yes, but you know you want to also be sure that what she learns is at a world class international benchmark standard. Because when she gets out of school, that's the world in which she's going to live and compete. It is no longer adequate for her to learn Little Rock algebra, Arkansas algebra or American algebra. That's the same kind of challenge America's businesses are facing, but in American education the route to getting where we need to be is much more difficult because of all the political and other interest group pressures that you know as well as I.

In order to come to terms with what it would mean to have a Certificate of Initial Mastery, just let me give you a single example. When you step into the commercial airliner that's going to take you on your next trip, you assume that the pilot sitting there is a licensed pilot, at least we hope, right? Now you don't stop and say, "Excuse me, did it take you six months in the Air Force to get your pilot's license or did it take you two years working on your own through a commercial enterprise to get your pilot's license?" because there are standards that pilots have to meet. It doesn't matter to me whether he was a fast learner or slow learner, as long as he learned it. And that's what we have to start thinking about with education. It doesn't matter to me if the child takes longer or faster to get where we want to go as long as we know what the end result will be.

And to that end the National Center has been running a project called the New Standards Project. It is an effort to try to take control over this very diffuse and much too abstract conversation we've been having about what students should or should not learn and try to put it in some common sense language. What should a fourth grader know about mathematics? What should the algebra curriculum consist of? We should always be thinking about the international benchmarks we should be trying to measure ourselves against. The New Standards Project is enlisting assistance from educators all over the country, and we are going to try and pilot what we think are the kind of standards we should be trying to meet with this Certificate. Is this controversial? Does this challenge the traditional ideas of education? You bet. Is there a better alternative for us to move ourselves forward? There may be, but I doubt that there can be one that does not initially accept the need for nationally articulated standards for every student to be measured against. Nor the need to begin to unpack the examination process so that it consists not just of an up or down test but consists of performance measures along a child's career, culminating at the age of sixteen in this Certificate.

Why do we use the age sixteen? We chose it because by the age of sixteen most of our children, whether we admit it or not, are on a track, whether it is explicit or not. We have this mythology in this country that we educate everybody. We are the great equalizer in our public education system. We are not like those other countries that sort children out and make these elitist distinctions. The truth is those other countries do a better job of bringing more of their children to near universal literacy and higher levels of knowledge content than we do because we start sorting our children in kindergarten whether we say so or not. We sort them by looking at them. "Well, that looks like a cute little white, blond girl; bet she'll be smart. That's a nice looking white boy with glasses; he probably knows math. Well, that poor little black kid, if we can just get that child to be able to read at grade level, we will be accomplishing something." We sort them in our brain all the time. We make judgements about what kids can or cannot learn, and then by the time they get to our comprehensive high school, they're really on a track. Yet we continue to hold out this idea we're educating all of them. I want some proof we're educating all of them and, therefore, I want a standard that all of them can be measured against, which then puts pressure on the education system to make sure we meet that

standard for the vast majority of our youngsters. And I want a lot of flexibility in that system so that it's not just how many years a student sits in class, but it's all other kinds of measurements as to what children are learning along the way. And part of the way we're going to get there is by committing ourselves to the belief that all children can learn, and believing if they don't learn, it doesn't hurt just them, it hurts us as well.

Now having said that, the second recommendation of the Commission is a very realistic one. Because we know that if we started having such a standard tomorrow many of our children could not meet it. Many of those children are children we don't expect to learn. They have many difficulties from their home environment. They live in a world that is disorganized: it's very hard for them to grasp what it is we're asking of them academically. The schools need to change to want to keep those youngsters as students. That is not the case now. Anybody who has been in education more than a minute and a half knows after those average daily attendance figures go in, whether it's the first of October or shortly thereafter, there's not much incentive to keep these difficult children around. You know you can do a whole lot better with the other ones if you don't keep them around. We need some incentives within our system to keep as many of our children as possible and to be successful with them.

The alternative, and what the Commission recommended, is that we set up a system outside the system, as an alternative system that is rooted in the responsibilities of recapturing dropouts, which is not afraid to use unconventional teaching methods, computer-aided instruction and other things that we know work with this population in order to move these children forward. So either within the schools or outside the schools, somebody, some institution has got to be responsible for trying to take all of the students that otherwise don't make it, and move them up to the level of competencies represented by the Certificate.

The third recommendation is building on the age sixteen certificate. We want children to have real choices. Some of these children will go on to baccalaureate degrees, but when you look at all the statistics we know right now only about 30% of an age cohort ends up with a four-year baccalaureate degree. Fifty percent start college, 30% actually get that degree. And we spend more time, effort and money worrying about that 30% than we do that 70% that don't get that degree. And we are unlike most of our competitors who have a much better system for helping to direct the 70% into future opportunities. So the Commission recommends that by the time we get someone to that level of competency, then we can give real choices and none of the choices should be choices which close doors. They should be part of a continuing life-long learning opportunity — the best of what adult education represents. Because some will continue with academic work, some will go into an apprenticeship program, some will go into work where they get work-based training and additional assistance in continuing their education. But in order for that to happen, we need to articulate clearly what we expect to know to do certain jobs. And we have the same trouble there as we do with algebra. What does it mean to be a sheet metal worker? What does it mean to be a computer programmer? What does it mean to be a retail clerk? What are the standards for these jobs that would transfer them into career opportunities?

You know most of us hate to hear about other countries and what they do because it's part of that mentality that we have that we're so different and we're so unique that we really can't learn anything from them. I have the privilege of serving on the Board of Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is where it is today because it is unembarrassed to learn whatever it can learn anywhere. The Wal-Mart executives spend as much time in competitors' stores as they do in their own. Sam Walton walks up and down the aisles of a K-Mart embarrassing all of us to death, stopping clerks and saying, "What do you like about this place and what don't you like?" and stopping customers, asking, "Why are you here and not over at Wal-Mart?" But you know what, that keeps us on the edge all the time. How many of us in education go into a school and ask what works here and what doesn't? How many of us in other businesses go and really take a look at what our competitors are doing to satisfy their customers, and what we could learn from? We as Americans have to get on the road and go find out what we can borrow from what works in other countries and bring it home. There is a lot of knowledge to be gained out there. The Japanese have done it to us in spades: it's time that we return the favor. Let's find out what works.

If you were a youngster in Germany and you finished your basic level of education, you would then have an opportunity to choose from a variety of apprenticeship and work training opportunities. Let's take an example again - retail. Most of us don't think of retail as a profession. You know, you go and stand behind the counter, you may learn how to run the cash register, you may learn a little about inventory, a little about buying, but that's about it. In Germany, you would take a course for four years. The first two years would be more study than work; between seventeen and eighteen if that's the career you've chosen. And you would study about how retail operates. What are the budgetary constraints; what does it mean to have an inventory; how do you know when you have enough stock and supplies, etc? Even if you're just going to be a clerk selling across the counter. Then in your last two years you are in the marketplace primarily but still with some studying. And then there is a curriculum that's been developed in conjunction with the education and business enterprises that defines what you're expected to know. You come out of that three or four year program, and you are a professional. It is the same for bank tellers, and nearly any kind of profession you can think of. Contrast what happens with our youngsters. If they graduate from high school at about the age of eighteen, they have already gone to school two years less than our European or Asian counterparts who go to school more days and more hours. So they are already two years behind in days spent. They then are in the marketplace. If they are not going to college, if they don't have a parent that can find them a job, what happens? Well, they flounder until they finally end up somewhere. That eventually may be in a permanent job, but, according to the research available to the Commission, that doesn't happen until most of them are in their twenties. So look at the lost time in terms of a person's individual opportunities and the lost productivity in terms of this society. We need to define technical certification programs where community colleges, four-year colleges and vocational schools work hand in hand with business and industry to define what various job occupations mean. And the education system has to be ready to experiment with 2+2 programs and with additional kinds of post-secondary programs that will help prepare these youngsters for these job opportunities.

Now the fourth recommendation. Business itself has to rethink how it organizes the way it works. This is probably the most unusual of the Commission's recommendations and often the hardest one for the audiences to grasp. Because when we think from our perspective about American business, we think that the profit motive and the marketplace basically determines how business is done, and business, unlike government or education, has all these external pressures, and you either live or you die, but basically that's how the system works. But we have found in our interviews and our research work that American business is in as much need of reorganization as American education. American business needs to be willing to be more flexible and more responsive, to give more responsibility to the individual employees and to transform itself into high performance work organizations. Because what is happening around the country is that many of our businesses, even the big ones in the global marketplace, don't yet understand the outdated, Tayloristic model of production that we inherited when we set up Henry Ford production lines is not only out of date, but its vestiges are seriously interfering with our capacity to be competitive. If you think about what the Tayloristic model taught us, it was that we needed to human proof most jobs. We needed to describe jobs in as small pieces as we possibly could and then we needed to have those individuals who perform those jobs heavily supervised so they wouldn't mess up. Business bought into that, labor bought into it in a big way. "You know if my contract says I screw in the same bulb 700 times, then that's all I do." And education bought into it. "Well, if we're producing people for that kind of production line, then we just need to make sure they show up and try to get them civilized by the time we push them out into the factory." That was the model that created the American economic miracle, and it worked. But it also enabled people with relatively low skills to command high wages. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to make a very good living for yourself and your family. But when, all of a sudden, starting in the 1970s it became clear that people in Bangladesh, in Thailand, in Brazil could screw in that same bulb and do it for a dollar a day, we were all surprised. "Well that's unfair. They shouldn't be able to get those jobs." And companies which had moved out of the North, where I grew up, down to the South, where I now live, in the 40s and 50s because they wanted to escape high wages and unionization, all of a sudden moved out of the South to developing countries because they could really escape high wages and unionization. And old methods of utilizing workers were no longer the cutting edge methods. We had to begin to change our mindset about what we expected

from the people who worked for us, we had to trust and respect them, and we had to give them some control over what happened in their workplace.

It's just as true for teachers in schools as it is for factory workers on a factory floor. But it has been a very hard lesson for managers, whether they be school superintendents or factory foremen, to understand. So part of what has to happen is that business has to reorganize how it does work in order to have the positive influence on education that needs to happen. Much of the lecturing business has done in education for the last ten years, about how you need to improve your production and you need to do better and all of that, arose out of the desire of business people to have the same kind of employee that they used to have. You know -- a compliant, docile person who would do what they were told, have the skills that the new kind of imperatives that the economy demanded. That's a mixed message. You cannot take a person and teach him or her to think and have high skills and be a productive member of a new business enterprise, then say, "but don't think while on the job," and expect high productivity. That's what we've done to teachers, that's what we've done to workers. And that's one of the fundamental changes that has to happen in this country. You can read any story of an American business failure of the last decade, and you will find that it failed in large measure because it could not change its work habits and work culture to meet the competition. And if you go into factories and other production facilities in other places that are being more competitive, you find teams making decisions. You find far fewer supervisors, far fewer middle managers that have to make the kind of production decisions that we still permit middle managers and indirect workers to make in this country. So we are recommending that business take a look at itself and, in that way, be a much better contributor to the entire enterprise of upgrading our skills.

And finally, we need a better system than what we have to integrate employment, education and training in this country. It is very frustrating, I would imagine, for many of you, as it has been for me over the years, to know that our adult basic education people often don't talk to our literacy council people, who often don't talk to our secondary school people, who don't talk to our post-secondary people; nobody talks. We don't have a system that moves youngsters from conventional public schooling into work, even though we have many pieces that are doing a good job in isolation that are totally non-integrated with one another. There has to be a coherent approach, and there has to be a willingness on the part of all of us to step over the turfs that divide us. And we all have to keep our eye on the same goal, which is to produce an opportunity for our children that is equivalent to what is produced in the systems in which we are competing. And that requires not an adversarial attitude among all of us, but a cooperative one and one that is willing to be part of a larger whole.

Now those five recommendations are not written in stone. There are many opportunities for coming up with better ideas and criticizing those, but at least they start the kind of conversation that we have to have around this country. There are many pieces of it that I don't have time to go into that I am equally concerned about, such as preschooling opportunities and health opportunities that we provide to youngsters so they have a chance to be competitive. How we reverse the reversible damage that brings 10-12% of our youngsters, according to the Education Commission of the States, into our schools with academic deficiencies related to preventable problems relating to pregnancies, birth and early childhood. Those are problems just as significant as the workplace literacy and adult education problems that we are focusing on today. But however we define the issues that have to be addressed, we need to bring them back to a child and person-centered focus. And we need to be honest with ourselves, by asking ourselves, "Is what I'm doing working? Am I willing to have what I'm doing evaluated? Can I think of a better way to make the system I'm a part of work better? How do I break out of the bureaucracy that strangles all of us as soon as we get two or more people doing anything? How can we produce a better product?"

You know American business, because it is in a life or death situation, has been undergoing a quality movement that has taken some places and really shown results. Government, health care and education need to undergo a similar analysis where we ask ourselves the hard questions. Making these decisions may not be tomorrow a life or death issue. It's going to be very difficult (although they're probably thinking about

it) for the Japanese to figure out how to get into our school market or to be in our legislatures. But it is a life or death issue in terms of quality of life that we expect to enjoy in this country. Any many of us in this room, very honestly, would be competitive wherever we were in the global economy. We're all educated, and after our lunch, well-fed and mobile. But that is not true for the majority of our people. And I want to end with a story that put this into a perspective I will never forget.

I was in Minnesota speaking at a very large breakfast hosted by the Governor and the leaders of the legislature on this issue of work force training and skills upgrading and the connection between the education system and the business community. And at the end of my remarks, the Governor's remarks and the legislative leaders' remarks, we heard from the SRS and employment security division and education commissioner and all the people were there and very anxious about being a part of solving this problem. A businessman stood up and said he had something to say. He was a chairman of a high-tech firm in the Twin Cities. And, if you picture in your mind what a very successful chairman of a board of a midwestern firm looks like, that was it. I mean just exuding authority. And he said his company did business in eighty countries. And he recently had to make a decision where to place two R&D plants and one production plant. And after looking at all factors, I mean they examined everything on these computer matrices -- what's the political stability, what's the currency exchange, they look at all these big picture issues -- they decided not to put one of those facilities in the United States. Because at the production facilities they could get that low-skilled work done much more cheaply somewhere else and at the R&D facility they didn't think they had the workforce, even in Minnesota, to do the work that was required. And he said, "I want you all to hear something. I'm an American. I was born and raised in Minnesota. I love this state. I will live out my years here, but my company may never put another job in this country. Because business is no longer bounded by national borders. Not just capital, but also production, R&D, and all the other aspects of business flow to wherever in this globe it can be done most efficiently." And he said, "It's not a question of wages, I'm paying more money in Holland," (where he put one of his plants) "than I probably would pay for one of the workers here in Minnesota, and I'm sure paying a whole lot more in taxes because they've got this cradle-to-grave system that takes care of all sorts of human needs. But the bottom line is their system produces more efficient and more highly skilled workers than we do." I don't think you could have heard that proverbial pin drop in that room. Because all of a sudden all the theory I've been talking about, research data, and the 2,000 interviews and ideas were brought home very dramatically. This company may never put another job in the United States. And I can guarantee you right now in Kansas, businesses are making comparable decisions. This is for me the equivalent of the Desert Shield or Desert Storm or anything else we've been through in the last decade in this country. If we do not address how we take care of our human resources, if we do not start paying attention to what children need in order to grow and develop, if we don't start reforming and reorganizing the institutions we entrust them to, such as our school system, and if business doesn't appreciate what it has to do differently to be competitive, we're going to hear that same speech made in lots of places.

I'm here, though, because I'm an optimist. And I also believe that when the going gets tough, we get going. And part of what your charge from this conference has to be is to take a hard look at wherever you come from and ask yourself what you can do to help this country address these issues. And if we get a critical mass of us willing to ask that question, and answer it positively, and be willing to take risks in the answer, than I'm confident we won't have to hear that Minnesota speech again, and we'll have lots of opportunities for lots of our states, and the people who live within them, to have the jobs they deserve for the lives we want them and us to lead. Thank you very much.