

5/1/84
United Federation of Teachers

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FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
SATELLITE FEED TO THE
UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
MAY 7, 1994

Thanks for the introduction, Sandy. I'm honored and flattered to accept the John Dewey Award. But I'd like to reiterate that the real heroes and heroines in the country are people who work every day -- and often under difficult circumstances -- to make our nation better with little or no recognition for their efforts. And that applies to many of you in this audience and to the teachers in schools across our country.

It's truly a pleasure for me to speak to you. I'm sorry I couldn't be with you in New York in the company of such a distinguished group of educators and community leaders, but I'm about to leave for South Africa to participate in the historic celebration of that nation's democracy. What has happened there has filled me with hope and optimism -- not only about the potential for democracy to spread throughout the world -- but also about our potential here at home to overcome the challenges we face as a nation today.

There are two people in particular that I would like to thank and congratulate today who represent the kind of commitment and dedication we need more of in all of our communities.

Chuennee (Sha-NAY) Sampson has shown great courage for her efforts to ease racial tensions among Brooklyn high school students. Chuennee, your work is commendable and serves as an example for all of us to get involved in the lives of children at risk.

And Gary Smith -- you are an example of the thousands of teachers in New York City and around the country who are working to make a difference in children's lives, and who risk their own safety to protect their students from harm.

I understand Ramon Cortines is there, so I'd like to say hello to him, and also to the members of Congress who are with you today: Charlie Rangel, Nita Lowey, Jerry Nadler, Major Owens and Ed Townes.

Teachers today are even more dedicated than ever before. Today, too often, you must brave personal danger in your schools, in your neighborhoods and even in your own classrooms. Too often, you must serve as surrogate parents for the children in your classes -- and provide stability, discipline and love.

You know and I know that nothing is more important to our nation's future than our children. And I want to assure you that this Administration has placed children squarely on the forefront of the national agenda. That's because the President believes that our children should start school ready to learn, and should stay in school through graduation day.

The administration is working to expand Head Start to give 100,000 more kids the opportunity to experience a fostering learning environment. The President signed the Goals 2000 legislation a few months ago, which for the first time sets world-class standards for every school in America, and empowers communities with the flexibility to achieve these goals. This week, he signed the School to Work Act -- an agenda for lifetime learning that helps restore opportunity and hope for children from the time they are born. And in September, as part of our new commitment to national service, the Americorps program will send 20,000 people to help out communities around the country, in return for money they can use toward their educations.

The Clinton Administration also is working hard to make our streets safer to walk on, and our schools safer to teach and learn in. The Brady Law was finally signed after years of gridlock. The Congress is working on a tough new crime bill that would put 100,000 more police officers on the streets.

And just a few days ago, the House of Representatives voted to enact an historic ban on 19 deadly assault weapons.

Still, one important initiative remains: Health care reform. And it is essential to improving the lives of children across the nation. Because you know, as well as I do, that no matter what kinds of programs we can provide for our kids, we can't teach them if they're not healthy. When so many children are lacking basic health care, how can we expect them to be able to concentrate on their studies?

That's just one of the many reasons President Clinton and I are working hard to reform the health care system. But there are many more.

Several years ago, when one of the first school-based health clinics was opened in a New York City public high school, it was intended to serve as a part-time resource. Almost immediately, it became clear that about 90 percent of the students -- 90 percent! -- had never had a check-up before.

Nearly 10 million children under 18 have no health insurance -- and the rate is increasing. About 30 percent never received childhood immunizations. Nearly half of today's private health plans don't pay for preventive services for children.

Today, children are too often the victims of a health care system that is broken.

The President's approach attempts to fix the system and give children the right start in life. And, despite what some opponents would have you believe, his approach is not that complicated. In fact, it's pretty simple.

It begins with the firm belief that every American deserves health security. That means guaranteed private insurance that offers comprehensive health benefits that can never be taken away.

The President's approach:

- * Will ensure that every American can choose his or her doctor or health plan
- * It will outlaw unfair insurance practices
- * It will preserve and strengthen Medicare
- * And it will guarantee benefits at work

The President's proposal also targets specific services to high-risk communities and expands health education and counseling in the schools. This is particularly important at a time when too many of our children are turning to drugs, alcohol and violence to escape the grim circumstances of their lives.

The President's proposal is not a panacea. It will not cure violence or eradicate hunger. But it is a huge first step. A step toward protecting and nurturing our nation's most precious resource -- our children.

Let's give America's children hope. Let's make them feel secure. Let's do the hard work now so that our children's futures will be bright.

Thank you.