

2/18/97 Chicago's Kid
Museum

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 18, 1997

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE CHICAGO CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

Chicago, Illinois

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. I am always glad to be back in Chicago and today I'm especially pleased to have a chance to be here at this museum on this auspicious occasion of the first Annual Lewis Manilow Lecture. I want to thank Lew Manilow for inviting me to be here, and I want to convey my appreciation, and I'm sure that of many of you here, to both Lew and Susan for their generous support of the cultural and civic life of this city, and particularly their support of institutions such as this Children's Museum and others which do so much for children.

I was delighted that Diane could give me the tour, and she had many helpers -- very small helpers -- who showed me around. And I was able to meet some of the staff and could see on their faces the enthusiasm they have for the work they do here. I am pleased that we could be joined by your senior Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, and I thank her for being here. And I thank Congressman Danny Davis also for joining us.

And I want to add my word of appreciation to Berniece and to Irving, because there are, I don't believe, two people who have done more to raise awareness about the importance of families and children anywhere in the United States. And I share the pride of all of you that they have done this work and have led on behalf of children from right here in Chicago.

I hope that as we sit here in the midst of this museum and as many of you who have had the chance to tour through here to see the exhibits that are designed carefully to provoke children of every age, that we realize we stand on the brink of an extraordinary opportunity and challenge. And that opportunity and challenge is that we now know -- we know what works for children. We know what children need. We understand that from the very earliest days of life a child is constantly learning. We now know what it requires for the brain to develop. Science has opened up all kinds of information to us that good mothers and fathers and grandparents knew instinctively for generations, but now we know for sure.

And that knowledge imposes grave responsibilities on all of us. Whether or not we are parents, we all, as adults, have an obligation to refuse to make any more excuses about what our children need.

And so I come today to reflect upon what I have learned and seen here at this museum and around our country, because I have been privileged to visit many places like this museum where we are taking what we now know about children and putting it into practice; where adults are banding together to build communities and strong families that will enable as many children as possible to live up to their God-given potential.

And yet, at the same time, we know that in this great city, as in every city and every suburb and every small rural town in America, there are too many of our children who will not reap the benefit of this opportunity and challenge that we face. We can pick up the newspaper, turn on the television, listen to the radio every single hour and hear too often of the lost life, the missed opportunity, the tragedies that befall our children.

So this is a good news, bad news report. The good news is we know what works. We know what every child needs. We know what they need in their families, what they need in their schools, what they need in their communities. We know what parents require to feel that they are able to give the time and energy that children require. We know what makes for good schools and good teaching and active learning. And we know that in countless places around America everything that we know that is good for children is happening. And we also know that in countless other places what we know will destroy the body, the mind, the soul of a child is also happening.

Now, there is no way for anyone to write a prescription or pass a law that tells people, be good parents, be loving grandparents, be caring teachers, be sensitive employers, be thoughtful public leaders, and always consider first and foremost what children need to develop and grow. But we know that in many ways we have the tools at our disposal, and they don't require laws, and lots of times they don't even require a lot of money. What they require is a different attitude and a set of expectations, both about our children and about ourselves.

Now, my husband says that we live in an age of possibility. And by that he means a time of great promise as well as uncertainty; an age that requires us to think in new ways about how to meet old and new challenges; an age that offers few guarantees for the future, but many opportunities. And though change is certain in this age of possibility, progress is not. Progress depends on the choices we make today and tomorrow, and whether we meet those challenges, particularly to our children, and protect our values.

We can start by admitting that we have to recommit ourselves to making America a level playing field for all children; by coming together as one community committed to helping all children lift themselves up to better lives; by making sure that the tools of opportunity are available to every person who is willing to work hard and take responsibility. Those tools are obvious ones -- obviously, education, health care, access for adults to jobs and credit, legal

protections where necessary, the ability to participate fully in the civic and political life of our country. But more than those tools of opportunity, we have to think about the attitudes and expectations that must be joined together in order for those tools to be used effectively.

Just today, here in Chicago, I have seen how the tools of opportunity and those higher expectations and positive attitudes can make a difference. This morning I saw at the Kinsey School on the South Side a school that works -- a public school of pre-K through 8th grade where the principal empowers the teachers, where the teachers collaborate and cooperate with one another, where the children who are older mentor and tutor the ones who are younger, a school where when you walk in the door you know that learning is occurring.

Now, are the children at Kinsey the brightest children in Chicago? Were they genetically chosen to go to the Kinzie School? Were the teachers singled out because they were the best and most sensitive, charismatic teachers in Chicago? No. Instead, what happened at the Kinzie School can happen at any school. People were given the support and the motivation and the tools required to change how a school worked.

So there I was in a class of pre-K children, some of them with disabilities and particularly hearing impairments because those children are being included at the Kinzie School -- watching as little boys and girls talked and did their work together; and in a kindergarten class, watching as they determined what floated or sank -- much as I saw in the waterways exhibit here -- and I could see very clearly that what we had at that school is what we need at every school, but what we still don't have at enough schools.

Later this morning, I visited the Women's Self-employment Project, not far from here -- a non-profit organization created a decade ago to provide training and assistance, peer support and loans to low-income women who were interested in starting small businesses and becoming economically self-sufficient. These women are seldom thought of except in stereotypical terms. They're not considered independent -- many have been or still are on public assistance. They're certainly not considered entrepreneurial. The majority have household incomes of less than \$15,000 a year.

And yet, in every case, higher expectations for themselves and about them combined with tools of opportunity were changing lives. Women were telling me about the businesses they had started, how they had moved off of welfare. And over and over again, they said to me, I'm doing this for my children; I'm setting an example for my children. Because they understood how important expectations and attitudes and tools of opportunity are, not only for them, but for their children.

Today I want to focus on one of those tools and a particular set of expectations, and that concerns education. The President issued a national call in the State of the Union, a call to action for American education in the 21st century. This call for action outlines 10 proposals that the President believes if implemented would make a significant difference in our schools and in our children's futures.

We know that to prepare America for the next century we need strong, safe schools with clear standards of achievement and discipline, and we need talented and dedicated teachers in every classroom. Now, what have we learned over the last years because of work by people like Berniece and Irving and others of you in this audience that would enable us to meet that goal?

Well, the President believes that we have learned enough to support each of the 10 points that he is advocating: First, that we have to set rigorous national standards with national tests in 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade mathematics to make sure our children master the basics.

Now, there is controversy about national standards and national tests. I understand that. But I also understand that in the absence of a national ---(inaudible)---- results, and we will be unable as a nation to say that we have met the challenge that modern education poses to our children.

What this proposal calls for is voluntary national standards to be implemented at the local level, but to use tests that are created at the national level to determine whether or not children in Chicago or New York or Los Angeles are actually learning what they need to know.

This process will enable us to be sure that we have set benchmarks of excellence for our children -- not to put any child down but to enable all of us to lift children up. There is no difference between algebra in Chicago and algebra in Boston. There is no difference between reading in Los Angeles and reading in New York. How we get the best results in working with our children will be left to the local level, but we have to conclude, as the Mayor here in Chicago concluded when he took the courageous step of taking on the responsibility for the public schools here, that we cannot have any more excuses. We cannot pretend that we all live in Lake Wobegone, where all the children are above average, and where they are socially promoted and where they are not expected to do well because of who their parents are or what their address happens to be. Setting those national standards will, for the first time, say to every child, we have high expectations for you.

Secondly, we have to be sure that there are talented and dedicated teachers in every classroom. That means we have to do a better job with preparation for teachers and with in-service training for teachers. And we have to be honest about teachers who do not measure up. And we have to reward teachers who go above and beyond the call. And we have to enable more teachers to succeed by staying in the classroom and not being promoted into administration and taken out of the classroom. In order to maintain the kind of core of excellent, dedicated teachers, we need to make teaching, not administration, the primary goal of educators.

Third, we have to help every student to read independently and well by the end of 3rd grade. Now, for those of you who have worked with and studied children, you know very well that if a child is not reading well on his or her own by the age of 8 or 9, it is going to be very difficult for that child ever to catch up.

The President has called for a national effort, with volunteers helping teachers, with parents becoming involved, with tutors who are willing to give their time, to make sure that every child is able to read. If we could focus on that one goal as a nation and put our hearts and hands to work on it, we would not only help many children to read, we would involve many adults in the lives of our schools, because as I go in and out of schools today all over the country, I see clearly that our schools need more partners. They need people who will be there to assist in the classroom, to help solve problems, to provide resources. And the more Americans we have involved in our public schools, through tutoring and mentoring and in other ways, the stronger community support will become for our schools.

Next, we have to expand preschool and early childhood education, and challenge parents to become involved early in their children's learning. Irving Harris has been a pioneer in our efforts to focus on the earliest years of life and learning. And now, with what neuroscience is telling us, he is a man ahead of his time, because we now know that it is not only an important way to prepare a child for school by reading and talking with that child, stimulating that baby, we now know that it makes a physical difference in the way that child's brain develops.

Now, we can't take this the wrong way. I've had friends of mine ask me, you know, now that I know all about this brain research that's going on, do you think I read enough to my child? We can't go overboard about this. Most parents who ask that question have done just fine. What we have to do is to reach out and take this powerful information and enlist every parent and empower every parent.

Ofentimes, parents will say to me, why would I talk to the baby; he can't talk back. Or I don't feel comfortable reading to my daughter because I'm not a very good reader. And my response always is that for a baby it doesn't matter how good a reader you are. It even doesn't matter how good a talker you are. Just having that interaction on a regular, ongoing basis, pretending to read the book until the child is older, doing whatever it takes to enlist that child's active learning is what will make a difference.

And it's not only the family that has to take early childhood education seriously. We all do. We have to be more committed to programs like Head Start and Early Start and pre-k programs so that we give every child a chance to be exposed to stimulating educational opportunities as early as possible.

Next, we have to expand choice and accountability in public education. The President's plan for charter schools is one of the best ways that any state or community can begin to provide other options within the public school system. As I have been in and out of charter schools around our country, I have seen dramatic differences. I think of the charter school in the San Fernando Valley outside Los Angeles that was in a neighborhood where literally on the school property drug deals were happening. There was a crack house across the street. And parents and community members got fed up with having their complaints about the safety of the school fall on deaf ears at the downtown administration. And they banded together to form a charter school. And they drove out the drug dealers. And they closed down and destroyed the crack houses. And they created opportunities for parents to become actively involved in their child's

schooling. And the difference is as clear as it could be, to walk into that school now and see the learning that is taking place.

Accountability such as that that is being imposed here in Chicago will turn schools around. And again, we know what works to make schools accountable and effective. It's a matter of will whether we will be sure to implement those changes.

We have to make sure our schools are safe and disciplined and drug free, and instill our basic American values. That's where programs like uniforms, such as I saw at the Kinsey School today, come in, creating an atmosphere of structure and routine, particularly for children who come from situations that are chaotic. They need that external structure in order to begin to internalize structure. And curfews and uniforms and strict disciplinary codes -- all of that begins to send the signal that this is how we expect you to behave and how we're going to enforce our discipline in this school so that you will be able to grow and learn while here.

We have to modernize our school buildings and help support school construction. Many of our schools around our country, particularly in urban areas, are in deplorable condition. This morning, I heard from Gary Chico of the school system here in Chicago about the numbers of schools that have serious repair and maintenance problems. Many other schools in fast-growing districts have no space for children. If we expect our children to learn, there needs to be a partnership between the federal government, the state and local school districts to make sure our schools are safe to learn in.

We also have to hold something out to kids who are in school so that they will stay in school. And that's why the President has emphasized why we need to open the doors of college to all who work hard and make the grade. We need to make college more available after high school to many youngsters. Now, some people say, well, not every youngster needs to go to college. I wouldn't argue with that. But sometimes the youngsters who don't go to college are ones who would like to, who think they need to, but who for financial reasons are unable to.

Also, we now have in our community colleges the most extraordinary array of vocational and technical programs that will be available to assist young people and those who go back to school after having been in the work force to acquire skills that will make them more employable in the future. So college is not just about the four-year degree, although we should make sure that any young person who works hard and is willing to study has a chance to compete for that. But college is also about our community colleges and the preparation that they can provide to all Americans for the future of their work lives. We have to help adults improve their education and skills by transforming the tangle of federal training programs into a simple skill grant so that the individual can make the choice about where to go to get the training that that man or woman needs.

Focusing on the learning needs of adults is one of the most important ways we can help the children of those adults. Making it possible for Americans to increase their skills and their employability will provide more security in the future for the entire family. And that is good news for children who live in poverty in America -- far too many of them -- and for working

parents who are always struggling about where they're going to be able to find that paycheck or that college tuition or that rent money in the future.

We also have to be sure that every classroom and library is part of the Information Age. And the President has urged that every single one be connected to the Internet by the year 2000 and that we help all students become technologically literate. Again, technological literacy is not a magic panacea, but it is certainly something that those of us in this room are providing for our children. And if we don't provide it for all children, we will create two classes of young people in our country: those who are able to navigate the Information Age and those who can't get off the shore. So it's a matter of simple fairness to expose every child to the kind of technology that we provide for the children in our own families.

Now, if you look at these points in the President's plan -- standing alone or even passing them in legislation is not all that we need to do. Yes, we need every one of them if we're going to create the conditions required for making it possible for us to feel that we are educating our children. But we also have to change our attitudes and expectations as a society. We have to begin looking at the promise of every child.

Now that we have ended the entitlement to welfare, let us also end the stereotype about welfare. Let us begin to recognize that in Cabrini Green, in the Robert Taylor homes, there may be children who are just as able as any child of ours, and that it is in our interests to do everything we can to find and foster that potential, to see that child as a gift to America, and to recognize that we have a lot of ground to make up.

But if we change our attitudes, then we also have to expect more from every child and every parent. We have to try to make it clear that parenting is the most serious responsibility that anyone can assume, that it cannot be entered into lightly or irresponsibly, that it is a lifelong obligation. We have to do all we can to make sure that only those young men and women who are ready for that obligation assume it.

We also have to be prepared to speak very clearly to every young boy and girl. You will not succeed in America if you cannot speak English. You will not succeed in America if you do not take schooling seriously. You will not succeed in America if you do not believe you can succeed. You will not succeed in America if you engage in self-destructive behaviors or violence toward others because there will be no place for you in the kind of America we are trying to build for everyone else.

So, yes, we have a lot of work to do. And we have a lot of attitudes to change among all of us. But we also have to expect more from every American, and we have to enable every boy and girl to feel that he or she can succeed.

I think a lot about what the 21st century will be like because it is hard for me to believe that I will be living in a new century and a new millennium. I don't know if any of you are in millennial shock yet, but I am. And I wonder what this century holds for my daughter and for her friends and for all the children I see. And I know deep in my heart that my husband and I have

tried to do all we can for our daughter and give her every advantage we knew to give her -- starting from the time she was a very small baby. I also know that there is no predicting what life holds for her or for any of us.

But I want all of us to live in a country where the future's unpredictable pattern can be met by every child being as well prepared as we have tried to make our daughter. There is no guarantee, but we have to give every child that basic, fundamental confidence about who she or he is. And that's a job that can't just be left to parents. It's a job that all of us have to do. It is a job that is being done in this museum. It is a job that all of us have to recommit ourselves to.

I think that America is ready for that job, that challenge, that opportunity. And I'm hoping that every one of us will do our part in the next years to make it possible for us to say, we have no more excuses for what happens to the children in America and we don't need any because we have done our best.

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

END