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PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS TO
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
JULY 26, 1996

Thank you. Thank you Carol, thank you Yvonne, thank you Sam, thank you all. I am very honored to receive this award. I must say that standing before a room full of principals still fills me with trepidation. Although, as we were standing out in the hall waiting to come in and Sam was trying to bring you to order, I thought of all the classrooms I used be in where people were trying to be brought to order. I felt like, well, I can do it. I can stand up there.

It is a privilege for me to stand before a group of people whom I believe are among the most important Americans in our country. I think being the principal, particularly the principal of an elementary school, is one of the key jobs in ensuring the survival and the flourishing of our democracy. I do not say that lightly and I do not say it to flatter you. I say it based on not only personal experience but as Carol mentioned, years of work on behalf of education, reading many of the journals and research reports that detailed what you already know, and what all of us should acknowledge. And that is that the single most important person in any school is the principal. You're the instructional leader, you're the coach in the sense that you have a team that you have to bring to its fullest potential. You have to be a politician and I'm sorry for that, but you do.

In fact, often times, people say to me, "How can you stand politics?" And I always say to them, "Well, I mean, have you ever been married or worked anywhere? Or been involved in any organization where you have to persuade people to do something?" If you've ever been on a church committee or any of the various aspects of our life as citizens, as residents even of this society, and that's particularly true when you're attempting to lead strong-minded people and inter-face with parents and business leaders and all of the others tasks that you have to perform.

So I am well aware of the multiple functions that it takes for any principal to do the job that is required today. And for you, as part of this organization, which really represents principals across our country, and comes together looking for ways to ensure that not only your skills are as good as you can make them but also that you're at the cutting edge of educational change, and in understanding what is required of our schools. I am deeply grateful.

Dream without the kind of education that we now think is necessary for so many more of our children to achieve.

Today we must decide what we expect from our system of public education and we must decide what can public education expect from us. It is not a one-way street. I get a little bit weary of hearing people talk only about what we, the citizens of the United States, have a right to expect from public education. I believe it is time for those of you who are leaders in public education to stand up and be heard about what you expect from the rest of the citizens of your communities and your countries.

And there is more than enough responsibility to go around. Starting in the home with parents who must understand the job they have as their children's first teachers. If I could do one thing, and again, I talk about this in the book I wrote, It Takes A Village, because I believe it with all my heart, if I could do one thing to persuade every mother and father in this country to understand the importance of talking to and reading to their children in the first years of life, I would do anything to see that happen.

Not just because I think it is a nice thing to do, not just because I did it and my husband did it with our daughter and I have read to literally dozens if not hundreds and thousands of other small children, but because we now know, as many of you long suspected from your own experience, that those early interactions with words, both verbal and read, lay the foundation for future academic success.

We now know based on the research that the number of words that are exchanged in a home between the adults and the children establish the vocabulary that will take that child into your elementary schools. And we know that there is a significant difference in the numbers of words and the quality of the words between educated and affluent families, between working but not college-educated families and between welfare families, if we hold constant so that we're only comparing functioning families; no psychological or emotional or other kinds of problems.

We only are comparing moms and dads who are doing the best they can and are being responsible for their children, you know and all of us should know that the more educated the family, the more verbal interaction there is. Even when both parents are working outside of the home there is more talking, there is more affirmative talking that goes on inside those homes.

I sometimes look at my two new little nephews and they've got so many adults around them who are reading to them, talking to them, encouraging them, telling them what good little, smart little, great little boys they are, that I sometimes look at their little faces and I could just imagine them saying to

themselves, "Enough already with all of this praise." But that's what we do for our children, that's what I wish every child could have.

Because as you go down the income and educational scale you find that even in working families devoted to their children, devoted to education, there's not much talking going on because many of the mothers and fathers in those families, they don't talk for a living like a lot of us do. They're out there doing other things that are important to society. And when they do talk very often there are a lot of negative messages; "Don't do that, come over here, get off of that."

And then when you go and look at families in poverty, and if you particularly look at people on welfare, again looking at moms, particularly moms and some dads who care about their kids, care about their children's future, you find even fewer words and of the words you hear, more of them are negative words. Because those moms and dads are scared about what's outside their doors.

And part of their job is to try to help their child avoid trouble. So "get away from there, get over here, sit down, don't do that," those are messages that if you are living in a lot of the neighborhoods in our country are important messages that moms and dads think they need to give to their kids. So there's a lot of work we can do to try to help better prepare the children who come into your schools. And you have an opportunity as leaders in public education to try to get that message across.

I visited a project for welfare mothers in Louisville, Kentucky, and the mothers were getting their GEDs and the children were in a program, a preschool program, and one of the moms told me with great pride, she said, "You know, I didn't have much education. I dropped out in the eighth grade and started having babies. But now I know I'm supposed to read to my children. So I sit up there and read and I don't even know all the words, but you know what I figured out, he doesn't know the difference." If I could just get that mom to talk to every other mom in her condition, and to say to them what she said to me, so that all of a sudden you've got more parents understanding what they have to do to be your partners.

We also have to look at the role that business plays in our communities in supporting public education. I wish that we could have booster clubs for fourth grade mathematics the way we do for varsity sports. I wish that we could have people, you know, taking elementary school teachers to the Country Club for a round of golf or a game of tennis, the way we do with some other folks in public schools.

I wish that the communities that we all come from and that you represent would understand that those elementary school

experiences are really the key. And supporting elementary schools, principals and teachers is a way of supporting children. And laying the groundwork for a better future.

And I hope that all of us who care about public education will take that message to the Rotary Club, and the Kiwanis, and the Lions and the Garden Club and everywhere people in our communities are gathered. So they understand that supporting elementary schools really makes a difference. And then I hope that our schools will open the doors even more to volunteers so that more people in the community can see what you see every day.

When I see that happening I see an enormous amount of energy being released. Because I see people coming into schools, sometimes as foster grandparents, or as volunteers to help out in the classroom, or to maybe play some sports with the kids on the playground, or even in one school I visited, helping out with repairs and maintenance that doesn't get done otherwise. I see a cadre of citizens being built who are going to be advocates for public education, because they've seen firsthand what you're doing. They've seen all the good that is being done, and they've seen the challenges that you face.

When I visit mentoring programs in schools from one end of this country to the other the single most repeated remark to me by business leaders who are mentoring children, by police officers who are tutoring them, by members of church congregations in St. Louis who are adopting in effect a kindergartner and helping that kindergartner and helping those teachers, I hear people say, "You know, our public schools are really doing a good job. I didn't know that. I believed what I saw on the television and what I read in the newspaper. But now I've got firsthand experience that I can tell people about." So opening up our schools, getting more people to be your partners, is another way that we can ask in behalf of public education for Americans to be more involved and more supportive.

We know that we have a big task ahead of us because as we ask ourselves the questions that you ask yourselves every day about what are we trying to achieve, what goals are we setting, what are our hopes and dreams for these children, how do we motivate our teachers, how do we deal with the problems kids bring into school that they didn't bring before? We know that those questions require more than pragmatic answers. They require us to put into action our values, the values of opportunity and responsibility and community.

This fall we will have more young people enrolling in elementary and secondary schools than at any time in our nation's history. More than the baby boomers, more than those of us who went to school in the 50's -- 51.7 million youngsters. For you

that translates into worrying about class size, the building of new schools, and recruiting the best teachers. It means worrying about whether the public schools will be shortchanged by shortsighted people -- all in the false name of school choice.

We do not need social experiments with our kids. We need to invest in public education and in our public schools, which have done more than any other institution in our history to unite Americans around our common aspirations and dreams.

Let's never forget what public schools represent. In our diverse and pluralistic and multi-cultural society which is the real strength of America, they are the greatest equalizer we have. They embody our democratic principles and our democratic spirit. If we give up on public schools as some would have us do, we give up on the American Dream and the promise of opportunity for all of our people.

I remember vividly the first day that Bill and I dropped Chelsea off for kindergarten. I remember vividly every day we dropped her off to school until finally in the eighth grade she said, "Mom, I can't take it. I can't take your tearing up: I can't take any more reminders about how another year has gone by, I'm going to school by myself."

But until then we used to drop her off for the first day of school. And there we were entrusting our daughter to other adults, to you and to teachers and everyone who worked in the school, trusting that you would care for her and nurture her and help her learn and grow. It was a public school in Little Rock, Arkansas, primarily African-American, but with wonderful teachers who met our highest expectations.

Chelsea thrived there and in the public schools throughout our time in Arkansas. And if it weren't for the fact that public schools, as you know so well, cannot tell the press or any member of the public to leave their grounds, she would still probably be in a public school today. But we had to make a difficult choice about the privacy and security that she needed. But we are such strong supporters of public education because we know that for the first eight years of her schooling that's where she got what she needed.

I'm not suggesting that public education for any child is flawless. It is no secret that some of our public schools are struggling, particularly some in our urban core cities. And some, let's just be honest, do not live up to the standards we expect, they are not doing their jobs for our children.

But name any institution that is flawless. I'd be happy to go and visit all of its constituent parts. We know that just based on human nature there will be problems that we confront.

But the solution is not to retreat on our commitment to public schools. The solution is to make all of our public schools as good as the great majority of our public schools are right now.

I believe we are on the path to doing that, thanks to this President, thanks to Secretary Riley at the Department of Education, thanks to the partnership that the President and the Secretary and the Administration has forged with the supporters of public education such as you and this association. We have seen what works and we are attempting to ensure that every school has an opportunity to put in to place what works on behalf of education.

As you may know, the President is a strong supporter of charter schools within the public education system and earlier this year I visited a charter school in a poor neighborhood in California's San Fernando Valley. It's called the Vaughn Learning Center, and not so long ago it had been written off, and so had its students. Today, thanks to an energetic principal and her staff, teachers who understand what their goal and mission is, community members who are there to be partners with the school, changes have occurred for the better. I saw it with my own eyes and I saw the way the community has responded because of the leadership by the principal and the teachers.

I've also seen similar successes from Duluth to Corpus Christi to Philadelphia. And I know that even here in Washington, D.C., which receives so much criticism, in one of our city's toughest and most dangerous neighborhoods, there is a combined elementary and middle school called Fletcher-Johnson that stays open from morning until evening, on Saturdays, and during the summer. The school has sports teams, a ski club, drill team, gospel choirs, string orchestras, marching bands, computer clubs, a newspaper club, and has sent its students to compete in the Olympics of the Mind.

Now you can imagine what an absolute driving force the principal of that school is. By going out, working around the bureaucracy, working around the obstacles that are in the way, in order to ensure that the students in the school have those opportunities. But that's what we want for all of our children. Giving parents and teachers and administrators, particularly principals, more autonomy and flexibility, works.

The President visited a school in Long Beach where students are required to wear uniforms, and one boy explained to him that the students picked green and white uniforms because the gang colors were red and blue. And this young man told my husband that for the first time in two years he could go to school without looking over his shoulder.

We know our kids need safe, drug-free, violence-free environments in which to flourish and we can look around this country and we can see some of what it takes to get there in even the toughest situations. We know our children need to be challenged, and stimulated and given the tools for a modern education and again we can see many, many models of that happening in all kinds of schools from one end of our country to the other.

Yet too often these success stories are ignored. They don't make the news, they're not in the headlines. We must, on behalf of public education, make it clear that the success stories are the ones that deserve to be heard and seen because they far outnumber the problems that we face. And I hope that all of you will help the President and the Secretary and the entire Administration get that message out.

As the President told teachers just a few weeks ago, "I will not tolerate an assault on the fundamental structure of education, opportunity and excellence in this country. Nor should any citizen tolerate such an assault."

And with your voices and your experience, others of your fellow Americans will understand what to do to prevent that kind of frontal attack on the values and the opportunities and the accomplishments of public education.

I hope that as we stand together on behalf of public education, you will have a broader audience in which to tell your story. You will also have support for what you know needs to be done, the kind of programs you've been supporting already. Just think of the few things that the President has been able to get through in the last three and a half years.

He's promoted a comprehensive strategy to renew our schools; expanded Head Start; elevated standards for teachers that will give them better training; created school-to-work programs that will train young people to find jobs if they do not go on to four year colleges; set a goal of connecting every classroom and library in the United States to the Internet by the year 2000.

And one of the most important parts is keeping our schools safe, whether it's the Drug Free Schools Act or trying to prevent assault weapons from getting into the hands of teenagers; signing the "zero tolerance for guns legislation;" proposing other activities that will strengthen your hand and the hands of communities against violent gang activity; requested additional funding for the Community Schools program so that more schools can keep their doors open after classes and on weekends.

We have got to give our children activities they can say "yes" to between three and six o'clock in the afternoon.

Otherwise, too many of them end up in situations that lead to self-destructive behavior and decisions.

So what we're trying to do is recreate that partnership between teachers and principals and educators and all the rest of Americans that I remember so well. Earlier this month the President called for five billion dollars over the next four years for school construction and renovation. Many of our schools are in terrible disrepair. When I walk into some of those schools that are kept as clean as they can be despite walls that are falling apart and other problems that exist, I know how much we need to repair and maintain our schools better.

But I also know that the real magic of education takes place inside those classrooms. And that's where the joy of teaching and the support that all of us should be giving you and teachers is so essential.

My father used to say, "If you get in trouble at home, you get in trouble at school." My brothers and I didn't like that very much because we knew that there was a solid adult front that we could not get over, under or around. Now we need to reconstruct adult authority again. So that you feel supported by the parents of your students and the citizens in your communities.

And I hope that all of us in the next months and years, will be standing firm on behalf of public education and speaking out loudly and clearly about why it is essential to support what you do every day. There is no nobler profession than being an educator. And there is no more dedicated group of people than teachers, administrators, and particularly principals, working in our public schools.

I recently read about the story of a woman named Hannah Breece, who was an education pioneer from Pennsylvania who went to Alaska to teach between 1904 and 1918. She was 45 years old when she first arrived, which gives some of us hope about new possibilities in the future. She was determined to go to the most remote villages and she did. She traveled by dogsled, canoe, on horseback and walking through snow and ice. At times she had to hide from bears, sleep in primitive unheated cabins, and once almost got caught in a forest fire.

Now luckily today most of you and your fellow principals don't have to worry about forest fires and bears around your schools. And I doubt that any of you commute to work on a dogsled or in a canoe. But like Hannah Breece, and like thousands and hundreds of thousands of educators before you, you contend with the obstacles of today. You face challenges that she didn't dream of, and like her you stay committed to education, because you care about our children and our future.

The President and I stand with you. We really believe in what you're doing. We want to help you do the best job you can and we want to help you change what you know needs to be changed so that every principal can do the best job possible. This is not just for our schools and not even just for our children.

If you look at our country, if you look at the faces of the American athletes who are competing in Atlanta, you see black and brown and white, you see men and women, you hear the accents of cities, and suburbs, and small rural towns: You really see America. That is not possible and has never been achieved in any other country in the world. We are trying to do what nobody else has ever had to do or ever wanted to do. Most countries made other choices. We have believed in public education because we know that without it we would be a very different sort of nation.

When I visited Bosnia a few months ago with my daughter, I not only spent time with some of the citizens there who were well-educated, Muslims, Croates, Serbians, that had watched their country fall into violence and hatred, after people had lived together for generations. I saw the pain in their eyes and I heard it in their voices as they tried to explain to me what had gone wrong. Why couldn't they live together? What were the problems?

And then I went out and saw our American soldiers, and it was just like the faces in the Olympics. As my helicopter landed in these two outposts, Camp Alicia and Camp Bedrock, I saw America. I saw every color of face, I heard every accent imaginable, I saw men and women working together on behalf of peace. And maybe even more than what they have done through their military mission. What they have done by exhibiting to Bosnians and others around the world what really makes up America, may be their most lasting legacy.

Now do we have problems? Of course we do. Do we still contend with hatred and prejudice and discrimination? Do we not live up even in our own lives to the values of our own religions and our own country? Yes, we often fall short of what we, ourselves, would like to be. But we at least try every single day. That's really at the heart of what makes America great, and why we are the longest lasting democracy in the history of the world.

And I believe with all my heart, that at the heart of that great democratic experiment is public education. So let's defend it, let's uphold it, let's believe in it, and let's be honest, make the changes that need to be changed, but say loudly to any who will listen, "We support public education, because we love America." Thank you all very much.

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