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Leadership Group

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

July 1, 1997

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
TO THE WASHINGTON POST PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP GROUP

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. Thank you so much, Kay Graham, for that very nice introduction; but more than that, for your leadership. Mrs. Graham has been very much involved in working to improve education in the District and in supporting education reform efforts. And for that I am very grateful.

I want to thank Ted Lutz (phonetic) and Virginia Rodriguez (phonetic), who have organized this institute and have given me a chance to come and talk with you. They asked me to come and talk and then to have some time for questions, and I'd like to slightly revise the program -- I will talk, but I'd like to have more time for questions and for conversation with all of you, because I'm particularly interested in hearing your perspectives about what makes your schools work; what could be done to make the systems, of which your schools are a part, work better; what could be done from the national, state and local level to improve the climate for teaching and learning in your schools; and to hear anything else that might be on your minds that I could convey back to the President or that would be useful to the general national conversation that we're trying to stimulate about education.

As Mrs. Graham said, the President has had a long standing commitment to education, which goes back really I suppose to his time as a student in the public schools of his state -- but more particularly to his time and service as the Governor of Arkansas. And in 1983 he made a particular commitment to try to improve the schools of that state and asked me to work with him, which I was very privileged and excited to do. It gave me an opportunity to see firsthand what I hadn't seen for many years, because I had not been in a lot of public schools since my own public school career ended. And so I was able to go in and visit with lots of principals and administrators and teachers and students and parents; and then became involved on a national level with a number of reform efforts that were attempting to try to translate into policy and action what we had heard from many people like yourselves who were veterans of the public school system and committed to the students that are in your care and devoted to trying to improve what went on in our schools.

When the President became President he began to try to translate that commitment to the national level, and during the first term a number of steps were taken to try to increase the capacity of our nation to respond to the educational needs of our students today -- efforts such as setting Goals 2000,

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reauthorizing and improving... projects and the like. As Mrs. Graham said, that he wanted education to be the first priority... that he hoped would enhance our educational outcomes here in

...I wanted briefly just to share with you... establish... with about in 4th grade reading and... I know this is an issue of some debate in a... persons who are concerned about setting national... look at the overall challenge... it is hard to imagine how we will... and commitment to improving schools of all kinds... not just the ones where principals such as yourselves are chosen because of your... many schools throughout our country that are... unable to define for themselves what are the standards they are supposed to be following.

...many, many schools throughout our country and I almost... walk in the door and sense whether good learning and teaching... it doesn't take much when I walk into a classroom to confirm... every range of good teaching and learning... you would expect it. Sometimes it does... of its community, but sometimes it... I've been in classrooms that I thought... anywhere in the country, in terms of what the... the kids and how the kids were responding; and I've been... the teacher was very happy that the children would... in... that... to my eye at least, five to seven, if not 10 years old.

And as I went from seat to seat asking the children... they were... they were copying words they didn't even know the meaning of. But they... that was considered satisfactory... I have no doubt that in the classrooms in which I visited and in the schools... the teachers... trying to help their kids. I don't think... that the teacher in the classroom that was stimulating learning was... less... of these... students.

What makes it difficult... because we don't know what we're aiming for... we don't know what every 4th grader... not just as... American... it is we...

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teachers' awareness and improve teachers' capacity to provide what we as a nation expect their students to be learning.

So the argument for national standards with national tests is one that I hope we will engage in and that eventually the President's goal of seeing the entire country committed will come to pass. Right now a number of states have committed, some local very large school districts have committed; but there are still people who say that what students learn should be a matter of state and local control. And there is a lot of room for curricular changes within setting the standards. But I learned firsthand as I traveled throughout districts in Arkansas and now throughout America, that some people hide behind local control so they're not held accountable. I never understood how algebra could be different in Little Rock, Arkansas than it was in El Dorado, Arkansas -- but I was always being assured that, you know, our kids are going to learn the algebra we teach them instead of the algebra that might actually help them when they went to higher education.

So I think that this is the kind of challenge that the education profession should embrace. We should want to see our educators clamoring to be held to high standards, because those of you who are leading in the education field should want the entire profession to be held to a standard. And that's one of the strongest arguments that I think we should be making for national standards.

Secondly, this President and certainly the Secretary of Education, Dick Riley, have tried very hard to emphasize the importance of having a talented and dedicated teacher in every classroom. That means we have to look harder at teacher preparation. That means we need to do more on teacher in-service training. We need to educate the public about why it's important that teachers have opportunities such as you're having today, but on a regular basis to get the sort of skills and upgrade their own learning and ability to deal with the challenges they face in the classroom.

Secretary Riley has worked very hard to increase the national appreciation and enhance the prestige of teaching. It's the first time we've ever had a Teach of the Year employed in the Department of Education as a liaison to teachers and as someone who would speak on behalf of the teachers. And we have to do more to make it clear to the public what it is that teachers do and how different it is today than it was when many of us were in school. I think back to the times of my schooling years, before remote controls were readily available to toddlers, and I can see the difference when I go into classrooms today in terms of how kids have been raised, what their expectations are, what the cultural messages are about authority -- all of that influences what happens in the classroom and, in a sense, requires even more dedication and talent from teachers to be able to deal with those changed circumstances.

Thirdly, we want to help every student tread independently and well by the end of the 3rd grade. We've actually made progress in the last several years on reading. I don't know if you saw the results of the latest TIMSS study, the international study -- but there was good news and bad news. The good news is that our 4th graders are reading better. So the emphasis that we've placed on

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reading for the last number of years is really bearing fruit. And I think that more teachers are feeling more comfortable using different methods to teach reading -- they're not feeling they have to be locked into a certain method.

The debate between whole language and phonics is now, I hope, put to rest, and that what we try to do is use phonics and whole language in whatever will work for kids and not be locked into some ideological attitude about reading instruction. So that I'm seeing more and more emphasis being paid by teachers to putting together reading strategies that will work for individual kids. I'm a big fan of some of the programs that have been pioneered in the last couple of years, such as Reading Recovery, which I think has a really positive impact on how teachers teach and how students learn. And in my work around the country I've tried to encourage more school districts to look at how we can really enhance the capacity of teachers to deal with all different kinds of students who bring very many problems into the classroom.

And, as you know, the President is committed to an America Reads challenge, which we are working on daily to try to enlist a million volunteers to work, to supplement what happens in your schools so that teachers can have some extra hands and eyes and ears and shoulders for kids to feel that they have somebody who cares about whether or not they learn to read.

Next, we want to expand the awareness of the public in early childhood learning and education, and that includes expanding Head Start. But it does more than that. Some of you may know, we had a conference at the White House -- that, again, the Washington Post was very instrumental in helping us put on -- just two months ago, where we talked about the latest research about what we know happens in the first three years of a child's life in terms of brain development. And it was a very exciting conference, because we not only laid out the research and had the scientists there, but we talked about what's being done to implement this research.

The more we can reach the parents of the students in your schools to know what they should be doing from the moment that child becomes part of their family -- to read to that child, to sing to that child, to talk to that child -- the better prepared those students will be when they come in the doors of your schools. Still too many parents -- particularly parents without much education themselves -- don't know how important it is to do that with their own children. So I'm trying to work with a number of organizations around the country to get that message out to parents. And we've started a national Prescription For Reading program that we're working in doctor's offices and hospitals and public health clinics, so that literally when a child comes in for a vaccination they're also prescribed reading. And I've gotten a lot of books donated by publishers and they're give a book, so that the parents know that this is part of what they should do -- not only to feed the baby's body and get the child vaccinated, but to read to the child, talk to the child, sing to the child.

And I've had some parents who don't read very well just very honestly say to me, Mrs. Clinton, I don't read very well, I can't read to my baby. And I hope this is not going to be considered heresy, but I've told them just to hold the book and make up the story and turn the pages. (Laughter.) And I said,

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look, your eight months old, your 16 month old is not going to know the difference. And then I've urged them to try to get their GED and try to improve their own reading. I said, because by the time he's three then he's going to remember everything you read to him and he's going to want to repeat it word for word. So you're going to have to work both on your memory and your reading. But in the meantime, just fake it until you make it. (Laughter.) Hold that book and turn those pages and point at those pictures and just have a good time.

The next time on the President's agenda is to expand choice and accountability in public education. And this is a very important part of the overall call to action. And we're beginning to see some real progress on this front. The charter school movement is a major part of this. We need to make sure that teachers and principals and parents and community leaders feel that the public schools belong to them, not to the downtown bureaucracies; that they are part of the education process. And I have been in some charter schools that have really turned around neighborhoods -- I'm thinking in particular of one that I visited in the San Fernando Valley of California, and I honestly believe that this school was made a charter school because the local school district had given up on it.

It was in a terrible neighborhood. It was surrounded by a chain link fence with barbed wire on top. There were two crack houses next door to the school. It was just on every measure you can imagine a declining and very unfortunate place for children to attend. It was turned into a charter school. The principal and the vice principal had a mission to turn this school around, working with the teachers, making them colleagues and working with the community they have done just that in terms of attendance, academic performance. But they also, because of their willingness to really take the school into the community, they've created partnerships, they've gotten the police department to bulldoze the crack houses. They've done a lot of things that might have taken years to get through the bureaucracy.

Here in D.C. I had an opportunity to visit some of the schools that are in terrible need of repair. And I said at the time I thought it was a disgrace that I would be visiting schools in the District of Columbia that you had whole hallways, rooms, stairwells blocked off because they were too dangerous for teachers and students to walk up and down and use. And I don't know exactly all the problems about why that has occurred, but in talking to the principals and the teachers I've been told that they couldn't get any response from anybody -- they would call and they maybe would get a coat of fresh paint over peeling plaster. It didn't solve the problem and within a couple of months of the school year it would once again be acute. And I think we have to do a better job of holding our public school systems more accountable. And one of the ways to do that, I believe and the President is committed to, is creating more charter schools and more choice within the public school system.

We also have to make sure and do a better job of ensuring that our schools are safe, disciplined and drug free; and that we use the public schools as they were traditionally used in our country -- to instill basic American values and to create out of our e pluribus society -- unum -- that we are all different, we all have different backgrounds, we all have different sorts of experiences.

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But that America is really an idea. It's not an racial, ethnic, religious identity, it is an idea that transcends and envelopes our separate identities and the schools have to be able to convey that. And one of the pieces of legislation passed in the President's first term gave schools more authority over drug activity outside their boundaries, and also much more disciplinary authority over students who brought guns or other weapons to school. And we have to continue that and we have to really bear down on that.

And we have to do more to separate out those students who don't want to learn from those students who do. When I was in Denver for the summit that was recently held I went out and visited a program called Summer Bridge, which takes junior high school students from the inner city of Denver who are either recommended by teachers or volunteer themselves, and take them and put them into a summer program of about an 8 to 10 week program using high school students and college students as tutors. It's had a terrific result in the areas where it's run. It's been running in Denver for three years, it's got some other sites around the country.

But in talking to some of the junior high school students who were there, I asked them what was so different about this experience -- because the kids have to commit to coming for three years, not just for one summer. And this one young boy said, well, you know, everybody here wants to learn. Another young girl said, I can get the help from the teachers here --at school my teacher is so busy keeping everybody quiet she doesn't have time to help me. That's a sad commentary on what is too frequent the situation in a lot of our classrooms. And we have to do a better job to reinstall authority in the teachers and have principals and superintendents back up teachers on disciplinary decisions. And we have to do a better job of separating out either into alternative classrooms or alternative schools those students who are consistently disruptive.

The President has also called for federal funds to help modernize school buildings and help support school construction, because it is not just in the District of Columbia where we have schools literally falling down. We have them all over our country, but particularly in our older, inner cities areas. There are schools that are very solid buildings, that were built 60, 70 years ago. The average age of the public school building in Philadelphia, for example, is 65. There's nothing wrong with those buildings that some concentrated repairs and continuing maintenance wouldn't fix. But nobody is paying attention to them. And I've even been in schools where literally you have classrooms closed off you can't get in to, and then they have trailers in the back yard for people to work in. I mean, we are just not putting our priorities in the right place.

The President is also committed to making it possible for every young person who's willing to work hard to go on to college -- and you've heard a lot about the Hope Scholarship, about the President's desire for tax relief, for parents to be able to send students to school. He believes this is important for several reasons. First, as an incentive, so you can honestly look into the eyes of any of your students and say, if you work hard and you do what you should do in school, you will be able to go to college. It won't be just a pie in the sky kind of claim; it will be backed up. You can even go on to say because our country needs you to continue your education, to get more skills.

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Secondly, the cost of college is continuing to go up and there needs to be some support financially for students from middle income and poorer working families who otherwise might not be eligible for those scholarships that are available, but would be able to go on to college if given some assistance. Also in the call to action is to help adults improve their education and skills by taking all of the federal programs that are aimed to help people who lose their jobs, get downsized out of a job, or on unemployment take it all and put it into one voucher so that an individual can get the skills and job training that they need the a community college or a vo-tech school -- but to continue their education.

And then, finally, the President and the Vice President have worked very hard and have gotten a lot of private sector support for connecting every classroom and library to the Internet by the year 2000. But then we also have to help to make sure every teacher is technologically literate because -- I have to confess, I am not. I don't think I'm unique among the people of my generation -- not so much younger people, but some younger people as well. There are a lot of teachers who don't feel confident with the technology that is streaming into the marketplace. So if we don't train our teachers, then we're going to have all of these classrooms hooked up and we're not going to have teachers who themselves feel comfortable helping their kids us it.

So we have a big job ahead of us, first to try to get the hardware and the software and everything in place; but then to make sure as we do that, that teachers and students are going to be able to use it effectively.

So those are the broad areas that the administration is working on to answer the President's call to action for American education in the 21st century. There are many pieces of this and there are at least a hundred subtopics under every one of the things that I mentioned in terms of parental involvement and all of the other aspects that go to make strong schools and effective learning.

But I hope that as we work toward making it possible for more teachers to feel that they are respected and supported and able to perform at a high professional level; as we change the messages to our students and make it clear to them that school is their work and that is what they are expected to do, and if they don't they will lose out in the global marketplace because they won't be well prepared. And as we try to create a broad national consensus about why education should be the priority we need to hear from those of you who are on the front lines, who are there day in and day out, who have a different perspective, certainly, than mine, which comes now from visiting but not staying. And I know sometimes when I show up they've painted the walls -- I feel like a walking public works project on some days. (Laughter.) That's one of the reasons I like to go to schools, particularly schools that need help because I figure they'll get some help if I show up. (Laughter.)

But I think it's very important that your voices play a major role in this national conversation, and that your professional associations and your

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other roots for getting public opinion to respond really do carry the message of what you see needs to be done.

So, to that end, what I would like to do is just stop talking and have a chance to hear from you questions, suggestions, comments, whatever might be on your mind. (Applause.)

Q Let me just say two things and facilitate our questions. Mrs. Clinton has been good enough to give us about 20 minutes, and we'll let you do the talking. I just want to point out that when I coached Mrs. Clinton on this -- it was over at Garrison\* School, where the President and Mrs. Clinton were reading and launching some major initiatives in terms of getting young people into the schools and reading enhancement. And I walked up to her and I just said, we're trying to do this thing, to get something off the ground for principals, to get them some feeling about that they're not alone, that they have some networking between the suburbs and the city and amongst themselves, and an aid in their professional development. And the first thing out of her mouth was -- this is after you were finished explaining softball in Chicago -- (laughter) -- was, a principal is the most important person in terms of making an impact in the school and if I can find a way to help you, I'll be there. And that's what produced her coming today. I just want to thank you so much for that. (Applause.)

MRS. CLINTON: Well, thanks.

Q Mrs. Clinton, before you we have about 35 principals. They range from a school seven blocks from here to a school 55 miles from here. We have leaders here who are managing 18 month olds to ones that have exclusive schools that are handling 19, 20 year olds that are trying to finish up. They are wrestling with issues of second language, technology. Their introductions of themselves were most heartening to all of us. And I must say there's one of whom who I think -- these colleagues here who has engendered both the admiration and the pity of -- by having a complete school of 9th graders. (Laughter.) Everybody's trying to figure out a way how to avoid that. (Laughter.)

They've described themselves at this conference -- one of the best lines was they feel that they're two bad decisions away form oblivion. (Laughter.) And we're trying to, in this conference -- and leadership skills, enable them, as they say, to avoid that fate.

Again, thank you. Questions.

Q Mrs. Clinton, I'd like to thank you and your husband for your advocacy on behalf of children in this country. My question is about teacher recruitment and retention. We have a growing teacher shortage in the United States, especially in the areas of foreign language, science and math, and special education. Are there additional things that you would suggest or offer in support of teacher recruitment and teacher retention?

MRS. CLINTON: I think that's a really important issue. And it's going to become, as you know, more pressing because we're having kind of a baby

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boom-let right now. We have more children in the primary schools now than I think we've had ever. And it's going to be a big challenge.

There are a couple of things that I know have been kicked around in some states, and localities have tried them and the federal government has looked at ways to try to encourage them. And in no particular order. One is alternative certification, which some of you have heard of, which would enable people mid-career to go into teaching and would have them basically learn on the job. And you'd have to have a system of mentor teachers in order to work with these incoming teachers. But I've seen in some school districts some successful recruiting among certain populations.

For example, retiring military people who have math and science capacity going into some of the downsizing of corporations and actually seeking some of those people who have enough retirement money as they come out of the corporation to come into teaching. None of them have gone to a college of education, they don't have the usual credentials, but with some training a lot of them can be very successful. But it does take a recruitment effort and it takes a system of alternative certification where people can really watch over them.

Secondly, I think we need to do a better job of keeping a lot of our veteran teachers in the classroom by changing the monetary incentives in the existing school pay system. A lot of teachers feel the only way they can continue to be true to their family and make more money is to leave the classroom and go into administration -- and not just administration on the school level, but administration in the central office. And so a lot of people reach a kind of dead-end, if you will. They don't want to leave the classroom, but they -- for all kinds of reasons, being 40 or so years old -- need to make more money and to send their own kids to school.

We need to change the way the pay scales in a lot of schools work, so that principals and teachers who are on the front lines get the monetary rewards that they deserve as they go through the system.

I think, thirdly, we're going to have to look at part-time teachers for some subjects. Like you said, language studies, for example. There ought to be ways to incorporate more part-time people who have certain skills that classrooms need. Again, this is not part of what we've done in the past, but I think we have to be creative about putting together the team of people that will make up the entire school system.

Fourthly, I think that there are still -- this is maybe more for the elementary grades, but it still happens in junior high and high school -- I don't know that we're always utilizing the personnel we have as well as possible. I think we have too many pull-out sessions where we have too many people who are not part of the integrated school day and that we could do a better job if we actually had more teachers taking on classroom assignments and trying to integrate some of those programs into the existing day, so that we would actually lower the student-teacher ratio when you looked at the number of teachers and students who would be interacting with one another throughout the day.

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So those are some of the things that have been talked about, and there are probably others that you know from your own districts that we need to be following up on.

Q My question has to do with diversity. I'm real concerned about many groups that don't necessarily fit in sometimes. What will the White House be doing to advance appreciation of cultural diversity?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you know, the President announced at San Diego his initiative on racial and ethnic reconciliation, if you will, and talked about the importance of diversity and talked about how essential it is for all of us to be more respectful of the backgrounds and experiences that people have. So he's going to be working on that and having town hall meetings around the country and trying to increase public awareness about the challenges that we face -- not only because it's the right thing to do to try to live up to our American ideals, but it's going to become more and more necessary.

I know that in the Alexandria and Arlington school districts you have many, many children whose first language is not English, for example. You have children who are of different religious backgrounds than the majority religion. I've been in some of the schools and I've seen a rainbow of kids, and I've seen girls in Islamic headdress and I've seen all kinds of kids out there.

So I think that if we're going to keep the public schools true to their mission of providing the most effective means of integrating people into our society, we have to do that.

But there's another side to the respect for diversity. And that is, I believe -- and I'm speaking just for myself -- there are certain tasks the public school should try to perform with everyone. And I think we should be very explicit about those tasks. No one is likely to succeed in this culture, for example, if they do not speak English well. I mean, we can cut it however you want it, but if you don't speak English well you are not going to be successful in getting the kind of economic opportunity that might otherwise be there for you given your natural ability and your willingness to work hard. I think the public schools should be teaching every child to speak English as well as possible.

Now, how we get there, whether it's a bilingual program that we get kids into and then work with them, I don't have a strong feeling about. But the ultimate goals should be you should speak English well by the time you leave school. And I am not apologetic about that because I think it is unfair to students to pretend otherwise, that they could be successful without having English as one of their tools. I think we have to do more to persuade and to model for students how they have to work together and resolve disputes together. And how, even if we want to be respectful of differences, there comes a point when all of us have to cede some ground to being an American, and that there are certain qualities and values and ideals that we all have to learn and we have to abide by.

So I think that it's a two-edged effort that we have to pursue. The one hand, we have to persuade and encourage and model for our students and our

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teachers the respect that is due to every human being because it is not only an appropriate response to make, but it is also a good teaching strategy. By respecting young people you give them more confidence and you help them learn more. And then I think we have to, in return, ask from students and parents some recognition that these are the American public schools; and part of the success of the American democracy for more than 200 years is we have taken immigrants from everywhere and we have not asked them to give up their religion, we've not asked them to give up their cultural identity, but we've been successful because we have helped them become Americans in addition to whatever else they were.

And I think you have to do both of those and it is a balancing act. And the individual strategies you follow to pursue both of those paths may not always be clear, but I think you have to keep both in mind. So that's how I hope we're going to have this conversation that the President is leading to enhance appreciation for diversity, but to also enhance appreciation and recognition for what makes us uniquely American. And that all of us should be willing to understand that and be part of that American experience as well.

Q I want to thank you for the support you have given (inaudible) visiting two of our schools, Cleveland and Cardozo. The President invited one of my students to the White House (inaudible) help him to navigate open-air drug markets getting to school. (Inaudible) knew something about that. He did and on behalf of the community and the school students, I want to ask you to share with him (inaudible) and we've very appreciative of that. (Applause.)

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. I will, I'll pass that on. I remember very well after the President talked to that young woman who told him about her difficulty of literally walking to school past open air drug markets, and his commitment to her that he would do something about it and, in fact, has.

But I remember talking to the President and I have to say, he was frustrated that this young woman had to go to the President of the United States to have something done to get rid of open air drug markets that harassed and endanger children on the way to school. That should not have to be the case. Not every young child who is going to a school that is surrounded by such dangers will have the chance to ask the President to help. And there's no way the President would know, because he's not able to know what happens on the neighborhoods and streets of every city in America.

It is unacceptable that the authorities of any neighborhood or any city would permit that to go on. If we cannot help our children be safe, we cannot fulfill our primary obligation as a nation, in my view. And I think that we need to do more. And principals and teachers need to be more demanding that your mayors, your police chiefs, your city councils, your school boards, have to put the safety of these kids first.

So I will gladly take back your thanks to the President, but I just can't resist saying that I know right today in the District there are schools where we don't know what the kids are going through because nobody has been to the White House to tell us, and it is absolutely unacceptable and it should stop and that should be the first priority of any city or any school board, to keep those

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children safe while they're going to and from, and in the school buildings themselves.

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