

Charter Schools Meeting
August 4, 1998
Indian Treaty Room

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
CHARTER SCHOOL MEETING
INDIAN TREATY ROOM
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Thank you, Mike Smith -- Deputy Secretary at US Department of Education, thank you Judith Johnson -- Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Arthur Cole -- Director of School Improvement Programs. I want to welcome all of you here to the White House and to one of the most beautiful rooms in the entire White House complex. This is called the Indian Treaty Room. We really love to have special events in this room. I don't think we have ever had one that is more special or more filled with possibility and promise than this event.

We want to be sure that charter schools here in Washington D.C. are given every opportunity to be as successful as they need to be for the children and families of this city and all who will be involved.

I am delighted that Jack Lew, Director of the Office of Management and Budget could be here with us; Alice Rivlin -- who is the incoming chair of the Control Board; Josephine Baker -- who is the chair of the DC public charter school board; Tonya Vidal Kinlow -- the chair of the charter school committee of the elected School Board; Eloise Brooks -- from the D.C. schools Superintendent's office, and all of the School Board and School System Representatives.

Thanks to you, we are on the brink of a very great opportunity here in our city. I am delighted that you will be able to hear from panelists who have traveled from across the country. They are passionate advocates and believers in the charter schools. They will share with all of us their wisdom and their "best practices" about how to open and manage successful charter schools. The people at the Department of Education, Secretary Riley have been working very hard to promote quality public education and effective charter schools in communities nationwide.

When Mike Smith and some of us were talking, a few months ago about our great interest in charter schools, here in the District. We knew from our experience, having visited charter schools all over our country, there are some rough spots along the way, there would be some obstacles and difficulties. Some schools would get off to a better start than others, but we wanted to do what we could to give you the best information available from the people on the front lines about you could do to be as successful as possible, as soon as possible.

I was also privileged to meet the School Superintendent Arlene Ackerman about two weeks ago. She and I had a very good discussion about all she has doing with her staff to improve the schools in the District, and in particular, the support for the charter school movement. She has been a forceful proponent for improving education here in the District -- and

is bringing new vision and energy to her position. She's also been very involved in and supportive of the charter school initiative here in DC. Unfortunately, we had to change the date of this event -- and Dr. Ackerman already had family obligations she could not break, something I deeply respect. She was heartsick; I told her not to worry, that she would be well represented by people from the Superintendent's office, and that she would get a full report; I'm sure about thirty or forty versions of a full report when she returns. I am very pleased that Eloise Brooks has joined us to represent the Superintendent.

I recognize how incredibly busy all of you are -- after all you are opening your schools in just a few short weeks. Now, I know some of you do not even know where you are opening yet. You will be, to some extent, relieved when you hear that at least one of the panelists also among us didn't have a facility nailed down. I appreciate your taking time out to go over all of the details, and to make the last effort needed to open this fall.

Because we're all here for one reason -- we're advocates of public education on behalf of our children -- and we believe that every child can learn, every single child -- that we do not have a child to waste and we cannot afford to write any child's future off. And every child deserves a quality public education as part of their American birthright. We're here because we believe that charter schools can play a significant part in revitalizing and strengthening public schools today -- by offering greater flexibility from bureaucratic rules, so that parents, teachers, and the community can design and run their own schools, and focus on setting goals and getting results.

As you know, this Administration, and, particularly the President, are deeply committed to improving public education and has been fighting for that ever since he arrived here in the White House. The President wants to expand public charter schools that are open to everyone; that are non-sectarian; that are accountable for results; that provide real choices to parents and students. The President believes, as I do, that charter schools are a way of bringing teachers and parents and communities together -- instead of other efforts -- like vouchers -- which separate people out -- siphon off much needed resources; and weakening the school systems that desperately need to be strengthened.

When the President moved into the White House, there was only one charter school in the country. This fall, over 1100 schools are expected to open their doors, including the ones represented here. A total of 33 states -- plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico -- have passed laws authorizing charter schools. In 1994 -- there was \$6 million in the federal budget targeted to support charter schools. In 1998, nearly \$75 million in federal assistance is available to provide new and continuing grants to states, the District and Puerto Rico to help charter schools cover costs for planning and initial implementation. The President has requested \$100 million for FY '99.

Both the President and I have visited charter schools across the country that are leading the way in offering important choices to public schools students and their parents. Many of these

schools are meeting the needs of students who had trouble succeeding in more traditional public schools.

I'll never forget visiting one such charter school in the San Fernando Valley in California, whose students were mostly Hispanic, the principal was Chinese-American. Academic performance was historically very low; attendance was abysmal. This school became a charter school. All of a sudden, parents felt that they had a stake in the success of that school. Local businesses and other community organizations also began to chip in. That school was next door to a crack house which kept some of the parents from sending their children to school; this posed the first challenge. The parents and the business community got together and bulldozed the crack house; they didn't ask anybody's permission.

All of a sudden, people in the neighborhood saw that things could happen that were good for kids. They began coming in volunteering their time. Parents, who, themselves, didn't have much of an education, were there in the mornings saying, 'what can I do to help?' I thought, here is a classroom -- kids wore uniforms, parents helping out. Parents worked in a kind of bartering way. So that they could find ways of helping themselves when they didn't know how to do so. For example, one parent was a good cook; she volunteered to help with the kitchen. She didn't have a car, so other parents would take her back and forth to grocery stores. So it wasn't just the creation of the school, it was the creation of a community.

It's no surprise that attendance was higher than 90%; scores on tests are up. Expectations for higher achievements have a way of being possible for kids who all of a sudden realize that they have something to aim for. I visited another charter school in Wilmington, Delaware, which was a great example of a business/community partnership, with a math and science focus. So I've seen first hand -- from California to Delaware, and lots of places in between -- what is happening is that charter schools bring together many educators and teachers, parents, and community leaders on behalf of our children.

Today you will be hearing from representatives of the leaders of the nation's top performing charter schools from across the country -- whose innovative approaches and partnerships have transformed their schools. They have not been afraid of accountability. Firstly, I'd ask the involvement of the panelists. We'll hear from them and hear their opinions on the big evaluation that the Los Angeles School District has just done on their schools. They worked tirelessly for the results and trying to toughen accountability that they were forced to meet as a charter school to make capital stretch. The end result is that they are now a leader in that school district.

All of us are aware that the charter school movement is still in its infancy. Like anything that we start, it will face challenges and we have some daunting ones before us. Let's be very honest today, we'd like everybody to lay it out on the table when we begin our conversation about charter schools. Some charter schools are successes, and some are failures. Some are not made with leadership, some are packed with leadership. What we want to do today is short

circuit the roots of the problems so that you can have a better idea of what you should be thinking about to be successful, learning from each other, as that is one of the best ways to learn.

You'll be talking about critical issues facing charter schools today -- like funding shortfalls -- that result in some schools running out of money before they have a chance to even finish the first year. Some engineers and community activists of the charter schools are filled with enthusiasm but not with experience of dealing with a budget. If you fall into that category, get help. Don't be too proud to ask for whatever help you need. If you've never done this before, you have no way of knowing what kind of opportunities you'll face; or what the reaction of your own superiors might be. There you stand trying to help your students, there is no shame in saying 'I need help'. That's one of the things we hope to accomplish this morning in these discussions. Ask for help, there are people in the department, in the district, throughout this country, who will be more than anxious to help you.

We have challenges we're working on, and that is to secure proper and adequate funding for the charter schools, as well as for all public schools in D.C. There are hopeful signs that many members of Congress agree with us that we have to have more money to meet the needs of both the charter schools as well as the public system. Last Thursday, the House Appropriations Committee ensured adequate funding for both charter schools and traditional public schools, but we have some problems in making that actually translate into law. We're working on it very hard with many of the people in this room. We're standing against the wall as part of the effort to try to ensure that the community gets the money that it needs.

As a charter school, you have the advantages of greater flexibility -- from designing the curriculum to the hiring of teachers. But you also hold a sacred public trust. If schools accept the freedom from the bureaucracy -- but don't do the hard work of being accountable for improving student achievement outcome -- then the students lose. And we all lose. I know that some of you have been working very hard to ensure that public trust is maintained by developing an effective accountability plan with your governing boards. And I've been impressed, from what I find, that some of those accountability plans can serve as a model for the nation.

All of you are here because you care about what you are doing, and you care about the children who will be starting. We all have a stake in your success on behalf of the children. Some of you I know have been in and out of D.C. public schools for a number of years now. I have seen the best, and I have seen the worst. I have seen kids performing with excitement in their eyes, and I have shaken the hands of children who couldn't look me in the face. I know that the kids in this district are no different than the kids anywhere in the United States. They have just as much potential as some of the kids ... That's why I am so pleased that all of you are taking your time, efforts, energy, and resources in making what we believe to be true in the reality of the lives of all of our children.

I am going to hand this back to Judith Johnson who will open up for discussion. I'm going to stay as long as I can, I have to go on to a number of appointments but I don't want to

miss hearing as much as I can hear so that I can be part of the ongoing discussion with all of you. I'd like to end where I started by thanking you for being here, but more than that, thanking you for believing in public education and believing in our children. And for willing to really stretch to give our kids the kind of schools that we had. The President and I, Secretary Riley, Secretary Smith all of us on the Federal Government side of this equation, will do everything we can to help you succeed. You know as well as I do, that the success will happen in those classrooms. The people you hire will inspire and educate our children. I'm looking forward during this next year to visiting more of our students in this city for myself, where you're going to give all of our kids a chance to be all they could be.

Thank you very much.