

1-28-00 NY Council of
School Superintendents

New York Council of School Superintendents

January 28, 2000

Thank you so much. Thank you Bill for your kind introduction and thank you for your hospitality when I was with you. And thank you most of all for thinking that I can sing. You are the only person who's ever heard me sing who would say that. I am very grateful that we were singing happy birthday to you so I think it was an appropriate occasion.

I am delighted to be here and I have a great deal of appreciation for the work that you do and the commitment that you have made for your life's work to be on behalf of children and education. I was speaking with some of the officers of this organization before we came in and I mentioned that I couldn't imagine all of the phone calls many of you received early this morning because I have friends that are superintendents and they say that the hardest decision is whether or not to call up a school and you have to make it when you are woken up from a cold sleep at four or five o'clock in the morning sometimes. So I know that a number of you have been up for quite a few hours.

I want to thank the President and thank you for inviting me and I also want to thank Walter Sullivan from Skaneateles with whom I had the pleasure of meeting and being with this summer and talking about education issues in one of his district schools and having a wonderful conversation. I am delighted to be able to continue that.

Also I am pleased that we have such a broad cross-section of the state represented here. I also have been told that some people had to turn back because of the weather. So thank you again for inviting me and for the work you do every day on behalf of this state. You know sometimes it is easy for people to lose site of all the progress that has been made in public education in our country because of the challenges that we still face.

As someone who has worked on and been involved in the hard efforts that have gone into making our schools work better for all of our children for nearly thirty years, I can see that progress and I think we have to take a little time to look at where we've been and where we are today in order to make

the best use of our energy to be able to move forward in this new century to do the very best job we can for all of our children.

I can remember that one of my earliest jobs as a lawyer just out of law school was at the children's defense fund. And I came on board in 1973 just as there were many people around the country focusing on the #'s of children who were not in school b/c at that time if you compared school enrollment figures in census figures you would see in every state across the country and certainly in most school districts and census districts you would see a disparity. And the mystery was where were these children and who were they.

So I became one of the people working on this study and I went door to door and knocking on doors and asking people how many children was there, whether they were in school and if they weren't in school, why weren't they in school. I'll never forget walking into a small apartment in Massachusetts and seeing a bright young child with an eager look on her face sitting in a wheel chair. She had never been to school.

There were no accommodations for her to go to school. In other homes I met first generation immigrant families who took children out of school at the age of 9 or 10 or 12 and put them to work. I met children who lived in cold climates like NY or New England who didn't have much money and frankly, didn't have warm clothes. They didn't go to school for large parts of the year. In place after place I personally met and saw some of the children who were not then in school. And any of you who were not then in education thirty or forty years, as some in this room have, you know exactly what I am talking about that there were lots and lots of children that were left out and we were part of writing a report about those children and a report about those children and that along with a lot of other work by many people around the country began what up until then was an unnoticed or at least "untalked" about problem.

I was very impressed then as I am now that the hard work of public education is left to each of us in every generation and over the years many of you have worked hard to knock down the barriers that stood in the way of any child receiving the education that he or she deserved to have. We have opened the doors of our public schools we have opened the doors of

our colleges. And we continue to push them as wide open as we possibly can. We have raised test scores. Lost in a lot of the criticism of public education is that as we have taken more and more children in-children with disabilities, children whose first language wasn't English, children who have other difficulties, we have continued to keep pace by any fair assessment of where public education is today. We've kept dreams alive and we have done it because we believe that every child can learn. I'm fond of quoting the mantra that is used at P.S. 1 in Manhattan, that is: "All children can learn. No exceptions. No excuses."

But we know still that just as 23, 50, 100 years ago there were obstacles and challenges in providing the very best schools that we could. We have them also today. There are many of us in this room who knew good, decent, hard-working people who made a very good living without much education. And it is just within the space of really about 30 years that the economy has changed so dramatically, that so many of those jobs that used to be available are just no longer there. And so we know that we have new challenges that we have to address. It is a revolutionary statement to believe that all children can learn but that is part of the core of the (inaudible) in our public school system.

In many countries children are literally written off: I have had the privilege to travel all over the world on behalf of this country both with my husband and alone and there are still many places in the world where if you're poor, you're of a certain tribe or caste, if you're a girl, you're not expected to learn. And you don't have a chance to see how far your dreams can take you. That has never been what we have believed, although, we have had to work hard to make sure that those doors were open to all students. Children learn differently and we have had to adjust to the styles and methods but we have never given up on any group or class in America.

Now, like you, I have been in and out of classrooms in many, many schools throughout New York and the United States and indeed around the world. And I've seen the magic of learning take place and I've seen the kind of boredom, lack of attention, lack of discipline that means that not much learning is going on. I have seen children who are totally engaged in what they're doing and I have seen children who are doing the same work that an older brother or sister or mother did. I met

a woman just recently who said you know, my child has the same teacher this year that I did. I did the same lesson plans.

So I've seen the best and I've seen the worst. I can sense it now having been in and out of so many classrooms as to what's going on just as you can when you walk in the doors of one of your schools and you walk in the door of one of the classrooms in that school. I've also been to schools with "state-of-the-art" everything I mean its impossible to imagine what more can be done for this school.

There's all the latest technology, there's audio-visual, there's this and that and everything that you could possibly order, in addition to what is coming directly to the school, the parents volunteer and raise money so that the children in those schools have everything you could possibly imagine. As competitive with, if not more competitive with the finest private schools in the country. And then I've been to schools here in New York, where you have buildings built for 1,000 where you 2,000 are cramped in; where you have classrooms with thirty and forty kids; where you have (inaudible) falling down and whole sections of schools that are (inaudible) because it would be too dangerous for anyone to teach or for students to try to learn. I've been in schools that are still being heated by coal-fired furnaces and I've been in schools that have long ago left behind 19th century technology. For more than 17 years I have been an advocate for working with people and bringing people together to fix whatever needs to be fixed in our schools to try to make sure that all of our schools work the very best they can.

Right after the Nation-at-Risk Report came out in 1983 my husband asked me to chair a committee in Arkansas that was aimed at the writing and implementing of new standards to try to raise the level of education in Arkansas. We brought people together and we worked hard to raise standards and increase accountability, and also to put more money into those schools that were ranked at the very bottom because of the effort of resources going in. How differently there were from the public schools that I had attended in a suburb of Chicago because I had a superb public school education and many of the things I took for granted in the 1950s have not reached Arkansas in the 1980s.

There are schools here in New York that demonstrate the

same kind of gap between what we can provide our students and what we have not provided for all of our students. We have to ask ourselves some hard questions. We certainly cannot cheat our children by lowering our expectations of them, that's something I know that all of you believe. We also know that we can't raise standards without increasing the resources need to go to enable all children to meet those standards.

And so I believe now that we have to take a hard look at the challenges that we face as previous generations have had to do. Yes, we do have to end social promotion because we no longer absorb kids who can't do the basics in the job market. I was speaking to a man just in Buffalo last week that employs a lot of iron workers a lot of very hard working people who used to have a very clear idea of what their job was but now they find they have to compete globally for the jobs that can be done in Buffalo and so he's gone out and bought them all computers and employed someone to teach them how to use those computers so that they can be do graphing and the kind of work that needs to be done to figure out (inaudible) the work that iron workers do.

And many of you know that for a young person who wants to be an automechanic they have to know how to run and understand computers because of what is fueling most of our automobiles today. So, yes, we do need to send a very clear message to our students that we are not going to just promote you through school without learning something b/c that's not fair to you and that's not fair to the rest of us because you need to be employed. But we also have to help those young people and the schools that educate them so that our talk about standards and expectations is more than just talk, but that instead, we have a planned strategy about how we can achieve them.

If we are going to make sure that every child can learn then we have to do a number of things. We have to make sure that our children have the best possible teachers. And I don't have to tell any of you that the teacher shortage that we face is a very serious challenge for all of our schools. We are going to need to recruit based on the latest of our figures about 2 million teachers over the next ten years--250,000 of them in this state alone.

We are going to have to do something about the fact that one

of every (inaudible) two teachers now leaves teaching after the first year. Now we can't just open our classrooms and leave new teachers unprepared for the challenges they face. How often do we here that the least experienced teachers are teaching subjects that they know little about. How often do we here that first-rate teachers and administrators who love their jobs are leaving in frustration because they are not getting the help or the respect that they deserve to have. It's not just a teacher shortage we face. We also have to address the respect shortage, the salary shortage, and the support shortage that rob our educators and the students who rely on them of the kind of the commitment that we should be making to all of you and the people that you employ and the children who pass through your district.

I remember visiting a school in Queens, twice, once last spring and once again on the first day of school. And I had lunch in the teachers' kitchen/cafeteria area twice, with the principal and some of the teachers and we talked about what needed to be done in just that one school to try to meet the needs of the students. The school is already overcrowded by five or six hundred students and they're expecting six to eight hundred more, maybe by adding some modular classrooms that fall. These students spoke 27 or 28 different languages.

I had a first experience for me. I went into a classroom where children spoke Hindi and Bengali were being instructed. Many of them were first generation immigrants, and the children of single parents but they were good kids. I mean I've sat and talked with a bunch of them in the library and one little boy, painfully, plaintively said to me, "You know Mrs. Clinton why is it that it's only the bad kids who get all of the attention. You know nobody who does anything good ever gets any attention. Now this is a child that wanted me to know that he and his friends were trying to help out some kids who were getting picked on and they were trying to kind of make it OK for some kids to walk back and forth to school. And those children deserve our attention and our support because they are going to be part of New York."

Gray Davis, the governor of California, had an interesting saying. You know he said that it used be that we had about 6 workers for every person on Social Security but at the rate all of us baby boomers are aging its going to be down to 2 people working in 20 or 30 years to support all of us. And Gray said that I'm going to pick out the two that I want right

now so that I can make sure that they get the best educations possible because I am really counting on them. Well if everyone of us thought of our children that way, so that when we see pictures of children we don't think of immediate stereotypes and all the problems we think, "You know, there are all the young people that are going to be working to fuel our economy who are going to be supporting us as we get into our old age, not so far from now. And then we would understand why even if we no longer have children in the public school system it is our responsibility and it is in our self-interest to support you doing the very best job that you can.

You know I have heard a lot of concern everywhere around the state about what can be done to address the teacher shortage and how we can be sure that every school has the equipment and the resources that we need. Well I'm very pleased that we are working toward the goal in Washington and providing 100,000 quality teachers and I certainly am committed to that goal. I think there has to be federal support for us meeting this teacher shortage challenge because it is a national problem.

So if I were able to be in Washington representing you I would stand up very strongly for dealing with our teacher shortage issue and making sure that the federal government did help hard pressed districts be able to afford the quality teachers that you need. But we also have to make sure that our teachers get the education that they need. There are too many teachers teaching subjects that they are not prepared for so we need to do more to provide continuing education and support so that those teachers can be the best they can be in the classroom. And we need to try to entice people who are mid-career and consider teaching. There are many people who are now leaving the military, leaving other professions that are interested in teaching, we need to have some incentives to get them into the classroom as well.

I hope we look at some incentives for some of our retiring and even retired teachers. Again as a national program to address this teacher shortage, there are many retired teachers who are still active and very dynamic and perhaps with some encouragement could be enticed to get back into the classroom. But we have to do what we can to bring down the size in our classes-particularly in the lower grades. And we also have to address the problem of facilities. All over the

state I've heard about crumbling schools, too few schools, the need to modernize. When I was in Buffalo last week I learned that Buffalo has some of the oldest school (inaudible) in the entire country. Many of those buildings it will be very difficult to wire for new technology. So what are we going to do as a nation because the problem of facilities is one that runs from coast-to-coast as well as throughout New York.

And throughout America, we have seen time and again that many districts cannot rate their property taxes any higher in order to pass the bonds that are needed to fund the improvements and to build the new schools. For five years, the administration has proposed a program where the federal government would be able to defray the interest on bonds and help hard-pressed communities have the resources that are needed to make sure our facilities are up-to-date and modern and I would fight for that because I don't think we could ask, especially a lot of the districts in New York that have gone the extra mile time and time again to tax themselves anymore to provide the facilities that are required.

Look when I think about education I don't think just about schools. Because for me education starts in the earliest days of a child's life and life-long learning goes on long into adulthood today. We can't just worry about what goes on when a child enters elementary school or goes on to junior high school or high school. We have to recognize that if we have well-prepared students then the family also has to take responsibility and so I have long advocated doing what we can to understand that we, as parents, are our child's first teachers and that much of what we want to do in the public school system will not be successful if families do not understand their responsibilities as well. So I have long advocated programs that may sound simple but which I think make a profound difference. If every parent in America, every parent in New York, read to their children twenty minutes a day starting from infancy, you would have a lot more readers by third grade in every one of your school districts. If they can't read well themselves then don't be embarrassed, tell a story, use the words.

I don't know if any of you have seen a report that struck me so dramatically and I actually wrote about it in my book wherefore, of course a number of years researchers from the University of Kansas tracked the word usage in different families of different economic and educational levels. Because

they were testing children about vocabulary which underlies all learning and they found that there were correlations-that children who came from very poor families-families that loved their children as much as anybody could, families that wanted the best for their children, but families where often the parents didn't have much education, there wasn't much verbal interplay, there wasn't much talk going on in the home.

And in fact instead of the kind of conversation that you find further up the educational and economic ladder oftentimes the language of the children heard, was very negative language b/c the parents were so worried about what might happen to their children. You've seen it; you've seen it in your schools; you've seen it in supermarket aisles where you see a parent saying, "No, no, no" or "Don't do that" or "Don't come near there," because it's not out of any sense of "I'm not going to make my child a very good learner." It's, "I want to protect my child. I want to make sure my child knows how to behave." But the message the child gets is that language is not a very comfortable medium.

Further up the economic ladder, in families with high school educations there were more conversations but not very much. And then up to the level of higher economic and educational status there was a lot of talk. Sometimes, too much talk, you know. But there was a lot of richness in the vocabulary. Is it any surprise that the children come already with an advantage because they have so many more words by the age of five and we actually acquire about 50% of our vocabulary by the age of five. So if it's a meager vocabulary and it doubles, it's not going to be anywhere near what that five-year-old's that's been in a rich language environment came with.

Those of you who are fans of Frank McCourt in Angela's Ashes, one of the gifts, and I talked to Frank about this, despite the most horrific poverty and drunkenness and terrible living conditions, one of the gifts he got were words...lots and lots of words which certainly served him a good staid when he went out to become a teacher and a very wonderful writer.

So how do we get the message across to families that they have to be full partners. The schools have to be part of carrying that message but so does the rest of society and during this campaign as I travel around New York I am going to be talking about issues like that that people don't often think ought to be part of a political environment or part of a

Senate campaign but if my campaign could encourage several hundred thousand more New York families to read to their children, I would be a very happy person because we would begin to lay the ground work for people understanding what they must do to prepare our children for school.

We also have to make sure that we do have access to quality childcare and we're just not doing a good enough job on that. Too many working families who are hard-pressed don't have the support they need. We also have to provide the support for more mothers who would like to stay at home with their own children, we make it a very difficult choice for a lot of families. So that mom just doesn't think she can be her child's first teacher in a full-time way because of the economic pressures that so many of our families feel today.

And we have to provide after-school programs and we're doing a better job in something that I've worked very hard on in the last few years so that where children need extra help where they get a (inaudible), keep them off the streets, keep them out of trouble, communities are able to provide that. But all that responsibility should not and cannot rest just on the school. Schools need to be partnered by businesses, colleges, and libraries, and others throughout every community within the state. But we also have to take on the issue of the messages that the larger media culture.