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UFT Paraprofessionals

UFT Paraprofessional Speech

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I am so happy to see all of you and to be part of (inaudible) paraprofessionals who do so much for our children and to advance education. I apologize for being late. I started the morning in Albany and there was freezing rain and it took a while to get up and get here. I had another event in Brooklyn. I hate being late especially where people can dock me or take away my health privileges. (Laughter.) So it is just a great honor for me to be here with all of you.

I have enjoyed getting to know Randy and grateful for her friendship and her wise counsel and the leadership she is giving on behalf of education. We are so, so lucky to have you at the helm and to be charting the future of education in this city. It is indeed for me a great honor to see you doing what needs to be done - raising the issues and never backing down when it comes to doing what is best for our children. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

I am also pleased Randy's predecessor, Sandy Feldman, is here and, of course, Sandy is now in Washington doing the same kind of hard work (inaudible) (applause). Alice Rubin. Thank you for being here and for all the work that you do to further education in our state (inaudible) Abrams. (Inaudible) Rafferty. And especially you Maria for extending this invitation to me and making such an effort to be here for all of us today. I want to thank the Laguardia High School Chorus that I know is part of the program (applause). I too want to thank Dolores Mitchell for the work you did that Randy referred to. We could have probably taken all day reading tributes to all of you for the way you have changed so many children's lives.

I understand and respect the role of paraprofessionals because I know that parents play in all our schools a critical role in helping to provide that extra special attention that so many of our children otherwise would not receive. There are so many children, and you know their names, children with disabilities, children who have (inaudible) falling behind, children who fall between the cracks, who don't get the attention that they need and deserve except for you. So I want to thank you on behalf of all of those children who are

learning and thriving in school today. And as I do go in and out of the schools, I see first-hand the work you do. I saw the table from 226 that are here and I have been in your school and I thank you for waving to me and for showing me around and being so welcoming when I have been there and so many others as well.

I also want to applaud UFT for the abiding commitment that you have to insure that parents are treated with the respect you deserve to have. (Applause.) And I was thrilled to hear Randy say that 7000, 7000, parents have taken advantage of the career ladder opportunities and have taken the education and training necessary to become dedicated teachers, as well.

You know, I read a great quote from a parent named (inaudible) who worked for nine years in Queens District 24. Her working motto was, "We're not going to lose that child." And because of (inaudible), we haven't. And because of you we will not. I thank you for believing in every single one of our children and putting your faith in our children into action. I think that everyone involved in the education of children, not just teachers and parents in the classrooms, but administrators, parents and the entire community ought to adopt that motto. We're not going to lose that child. We're not going to allow any child to fall behind or through the cracks of our education system.

You know, for more than thirty years that I have been in and out of schools, I have worked on issues and challenges that face children and families, I've seen first-hand what you see every day here in the schools of New York. I've cared deeply as you do about what happens to our children, and I know, and you know, there is no more important issue than the education of our children.

I was thinking as I was looking out at the crowd and I was reminiscing in my own mind about all of the work that I have done through the years and as Randy was talking about the work you do for children with disabilities, children in special ed, I thought about one of the very first jobs that I had. It was with the Children's Defense Fund. You know, we had taken census data and compared it to school enrollment data and we saw there were all these missing children. We didn't know where they were. So, I went door to door. I knocked on doors in several states and I asked people, "Did they have

school-age children and were those children in school?" Now this was back in 1973. Many people said, "Yes, they had school-age children but the children had to be at home to take care of younger siblings while the parents worked." Or a child might have a minor disability, perhaps in a wheelchair, from deafness or blindness, and, therefore, the child would not go to school because the schools would not accept a child with such a disability in those days.

I could not imagine what it must have been like for those children and their families being deprived of an education, the obstacles that had to be overcome. Well, we had to change the laws and we had to change a lot of attitudes and we had to provide the kind of support that you provide to knock down those barriers, to try to make sure every child had a chance.

And I think we have a lot to be proud of because we did open the doors of schools and we have opened the doors of college. We have raised test scores and we have expanded head start. We have done it because we believe in the motto of P.S. 1 here in Manhattan, "All children can learn - no exceptions, no excuses" and you know that better than anyone. (Applause.)

But I know also, along with you, that where we go from here depends upon our commitment to continuing to improve and reform and provide the resources that are needed. I have been in classrooms where children are learning because administrators, parents, teachers and paras have come together to raise standards and turn their failing schools around. They are an inspiration. But, I have also been in schools and some of you have been in them, too, where the ceiling plaster is falling down, where the corridors are barred off, where the windows are broken, where children are going to class in hallways and closets. I know that in many of our schools right here in the city the overcrowding is to such an extent that we don't know where we are going to put the children next September. And I know that for many of you, it has made your job even more difficult. And think of how the children feel. How are they supposed to feel? Will they believe they are valued? How are they supposed to learn?

Well, I think we have a lot of work to do. It is work I have done since 1983 when I chaired a committee in Arkansas aimed at improving the education system. I worked with so many people to try to raise standards and raise resources,

implement increased accountability, including in that state at that time teacher testing, updated our curriculum to help meet our goals. We did because we knew we only cheated our children if we lowered our expectations for them. And we did it because we knew you cannot raise standards without increasing the resources need to meet them. (Applause.) Yes, we do need to end social promotion but what good does it do to raise the bar if we don't lift up our young people to be able to vault across it. (Applause.) So, let's pledge ourselves to matching high standards and high expectations with greater resources and investment.

We know that there isn't any greater influence on our children than who our teachers and our paraprofessionals are. We're facing a teacher shortage. It's a teacher shortage that is going to pose incredible challenges to our schools in the next few years. In the next ten years around the nation it is predicted that about half of our teachers will retire or leave teaching. Here in New York City I have been told the number is closer to 70% in the next five years. That is a terrifying statistic because we know who will be most disadvantaged. It will be the children who are already in poor schools under difficult circumstances. And I've met too many first grade teachers who love their students but tell me that because they are not getting the help or the respect they deserve they are leaving the profession or they are moving out of New York City to (inaudible). (Applause.)

I was in Rockland County - that's where Randy is from - and I was visiting with some people a week or so ago and I met a teacher who had been teaching in the New York City schools for, I think, thirteen years. In the last year who taught here in the City her class was held in a hallway. She said the textbooks she was given to use were older than she was (laughter). She finally said to herself, "I'm not able to teach under these circumstances." She left the City schools, moved to Rockland County, got a job and immediately started making \$20,000 more. So, if we don't face up to what we need to do to address not just the teacher shortage but also the salary shortage, the support shortage, the (inaudible) shortage (applause), we are going to hear a lot more stories like the one I just told you.

That's why, if I am elected to the U. S. Senate with your help, I'm going to address the teacher shortage. (Applause.) I will fight to create a national Teacher Corp that will provide college

scholarships to young people who commit to teach four years in at-risk schools here in the City. (Applause.) That way we can put 60,000 new teachers a year into our schools and, especially, the ones that need them the most. I also believe we should offer mid-career professionals alternative pathways to teacher certification. (Applause.)

We have seen how this works in the last few years with the Defense Department's troops-to-teachers program where we are sending retired military men and women into our neediest schools. Now we want to take professionals from every sector of society, including paraprofessionals, and put you on the front lines of our (inaudible) world-class schools. You know, I think if we give signing bonuses to athletes we ought to give signing bonuses to new teachers. (Applause.) That's why I propose and will fight for an initiative to help paraprofessionals become fully certified teachers. (Applause.) I'll fight to help school districts develop career ladder programs that offer the skills training, the professional development and the certification you need to become teachers. (Applause.)

But, you know, another complaint I've heard all over New York is that sometimes people who want to teach don't know how to go about getting that opportunity. They may not even know what jobs are open even in their own community. I had a teacher tell me that there was a job open in her own high school she didn't know about. So, there are a lot of (inaudible) certified or where to go to get the jobs that are open to them. I will pledge to you to work to create a national clearinghouse so that people can learn about teaching jobs and the skills they will need in order to fulfill those jobs. (Applause.)

But, you know, better than I, that we have to do more than just recruit additional teachers and provide career ladders to parents. We have to do something about the physical condition of our schools. (Applause.) I could not believe the condition of some of the New York City schools when I started visiting regularly about seven or eight years ago. There were whole parts of schools that were barred off that you couldn't go in. There were restrooms that had been broken for years. I said to myself, "You know, I have a little test. I call it, The Chelsea Test." You can put in the name of your child. You think about it. And I always say to myself when I go into a school or day care center or any place that takes care of kids, "Would this pass my test?" And I thought about all of those families who were sending their children, those

bright-eyed, beautiful little boys and girls, to places that are literally dangerous for them to walk in the front door.

So, I would like to be on your side in the fight to get Federal funds that will help us repair and construct the schooling that we need here in this City and throughout New York State. (Applause.) I will fight to create a program that will (inaudible) the interest on school construction bonds so that hard-pressed communities can have the resources they need to update our school buildings. I want to work with Congressman Rangel to pass legislation for 24 billion dollars in Federal funding to repair and modernize our crumbling schools. (Applause.)

And we also have to be sure that every single school is connected to the internet and that there are enough computers for every single child that has access to one. (Applause.) In so many of the schools that I visit or hear about, I'm told that there is a computer lab or there is a computer in each classroom but many of the children don't have computers at home and have to wait in line and often don't get a turn to use the computer. That is creating what we call, "the digital divide," and I want to help wipe out that digital divide. Every child should have access to the internet and a computer to prepare for the new economy. (Applause during last sentence.)

Now, we also have to face up to the fact that if any school is failing, it should be given fair warning that it must turn around or it should be shut down. No child should have to waste any more time in a school that is failing that child. It is not fair to our children. (Applause.)

If we do believe all children can learn then we must use standards and accountability, including testing to identify those children who need extra help and make sure that they get that extra help. I am a strong supporter of after-school and summer school programs with the resources that are necessary to make them work so that children can get the year-round help they need to catch up and make sure they are ready to go onto the next grade. It is working in other places.

It can work here in New York. We just have to be committed to putting our resources where our rhetoric is. And if we do that, there is no reason why we cannot point with pride to the

New York City schools. I remind people all the time that we have some of the best schools and, certainly, some of the smartest students you can find anywhere in America right here in New York City. (Applause.) Every year when the results come out from the nationwide science contests (it used to be called the Westinghouse contest; now it is called the Intel contest) do you know what school district in America always leads the list? The New York City Public School District (inaudible). (Applause.)

So, I want this kind of balanced approach, Yes, high standards and accountability but mixed with the resources and the respect that go along with it. Now, there are some who reject this kind of balanced approach. They turn instead to gimmicks like vouchers claiming that's what will cure all the problems in our schools. I think they are dead wrong. What do you think? (Applause.) We've tried voucher experiments. We've seen no real evidence that they make a difference in student achievement. Instead, vouchers leave communities even more divided, public schools with fewer resources and students with less hope. And they distract us from the real work we need to do to fix our public schools. (Inaudible) we do have real problems that demand action - not political posturing. We should ask our leaders what kind of solution they offer. Will you spend your time firing people or fixing our schools? Will you sell off the school board building or invest in our children's education? (Applause.) Will you resort to teacher bashing or engage in problem solving? (Applause.)

Real leadership requires that you roll up your sleeves and get to work with people - not point your fingers or clench your fists. I have found that when your fingers are pointed and your fists are clenched you can't roll up your sleeves and get to work. (Applause.) I can promise you here today that I will be the kind of leader who is always ready to roll up my sleeves and work with you to improve the lives of our children. That, to me, is our most important obligation. And it is critical that all New Yorkers understand what is at stake in this election.

I believe the quality of education in New York and the future of our children is at stake. We are living at a time when education is the fault line between those who will move ahead and those who will be left behind. Now more than ever we owe all of our children world-class education. And this election presents New Yorkers with a stark choice. It is a choice

between walking away from our public schools or digging in and making sure that neither child nor school falls between the cracks.

I am proud that this November I will be on the ticket with Vice President Al Gore. (Applause.) He will make education his priority as President. He has worked long and hard on this issue and together I will work with him; I will fight with him; I will be by his side; as we fix our crumbling schools, as we put more teachers in our classrooms to lower class size, as we improve the quality of education. And I think we know that is not the priority of the Bush-Guiliani team. (Applause.) That other team - they want to talk about gimmicks, like vouchers. And that's the conversation I am more than willing to have. Because I believe there isn't any more important issue confronting us.

Public service has been my life but it has not as yet included public office. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the support of so many of you here and throughout this city. I want this to be a people's campaign, a grass roots campaign with as many of you involved as we possibly can include. I know it is not going to be an easy campaign. But, you know, nothing worth doing is easy. (Applause.) And it is a fight worth making. (Applause.) And I ask each and every one of you here today to talk with your families, your friends, your neighbors, your colleagues about how important this election is to our children, to education and to our future. And be sure to tell them that, just as I have for thirty years, I will fight my heart out for every single child and I will go to the mat for public education and that my vote and my voice will be on your side in the United States Senate. Thank you all very much. (Applause.)