The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. BILIRAKIS] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. BILIRAKIS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AGENDA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 1997, the gentleman from New Jersey [Mr. PALLONE] is recognized for half the time until midnight as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. PALLONE. Mr. Speaker, tonight I wanted to take our Democratic time to discuss the Democrats' education agenda. I have a number of my colleagues who are here to join me. We basically want to talk about what we have accomplished to date in this Congress and what we likely will focus on in the wake of these accomplishments.

First, I think most of my colleagues are aware that in July congressional leaders and the White House reached a historic budget agreement that will balance the Federal budget by 2002. Included in this agreement were a host of tax breaks designed to help the average working American family meet the runaway costs of education in this country. The inclusions of these tax breaks, Mr. Speaker, I believe was a great victory for both the American people, but also for the Democratic Party because the education tax breaks have long been at the center of the Democratic education agenda, and I think it is important to remember as we move toward the next phase of this agenda that Republicans only agreed to the education provisions of the budget because the Democrats basically drew the line in the sand and said that these were the provisions that we wanted. Of course, President Clinton played a major role in that effort.

The problem was that many of the education tax breaks that the Republicans had initially proposed benefited more wealthy Americans than they would have the middle or lower income individual. I just wanted to give an example of that.

In June, the U.S. Student Association, which has been around for about 50 years, wrote that students around the country are registering their disappointment with Republican Chairman Archer's plan for education tax initiatives because that package, the Republican package, would do nothing to expand access to education. They were concerned about the fact that the Republicans were not looking at the President's education tax proposals and that the Republican plan shifted benefits away from middle-income families and basically funneled aid to those with greater resources. But I do not want to keep prolonging this debate. Essentially the Democrats won and we are happy with the result.

One of the most important tax benefits included by the Democrats was the HOPE scholarship, something again that President Clinton pushed for. As a result, students will be eligible for 1,500 dollars' worth of tax credits to help pay for the first 2 years of postsecondary education. But the HOPE scholarship, even though it received a lot of acclaim, was by no means the only initiative that was included as a result of Democratic efforts. Also included is a tax credit covering 20 percent of tuition costs, up to $5,000 ceiling through the year 2002 and after 2002 the ceiling rises to $10,000 for the third and fourth year of college. Under this plan, to basically state it in more human terms, in 2003 a student in a college with a tuition of $12,000 would receive a $2,000 tax credit.

Another important provision included in the budget agreement, again as a result of Democratic efforts, was a large increase in funding for the Pell grant, for that program which many students rely on.

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As a result of the Democrats, the fiscal year 1998 education appropriation bill provides a $1.5 billion increase in the Pell grant program. That is an increase of about 26 percent.

And there are a lot of other programs, I am not going to get into them all, but there are other things that are in the budget that the Democrats pushed for, like the Education Technology Challenge Fund, the America Reads Initiative. Again, these were top priorities of the Democrat's ''Family First'' agenda and also highly recommended by the President.

I am not mentioning these Democratic success stories on education just to, as my colleagues know, crow about it, but also to say not only that we are happy about what we accomplished, but that we think a lot more needs to be done; I mean, the fight is far from over.

One area where Democrats will be focusing their attention in the weeks to come is the implementation of rigorous academic standards. Indeed, we will be seeking to continue to expand upon the progress made in this area through the Goals 2000 program, a program that I should point out has long been a target of the Republican Party. I do not know why Goals 2000 is often targeted for extinction by the Republican leadership, because actually, if you look at it, it was first developed under President Bush. He actually suggested national goals for education, and it was approved by both Houses of Congress under his administration.

But President Clinton really has done the most to try to move Goals 2000 forward, and he signed a bill that basically tries to move Goals 2000 to the next step, provide significant resources for it, but I also have to stress because I know that the Republicans on the other side, even this morning here in the well, started to talk about the fact that the Democrats with their national standards were ignoring the State and local responsibility for education, and I would say just the opposite is true. The President, when he signed Goals 2000 in 1994, specifically stressed that education is primarily a State and local responsibility.

Democrats understand that, but at the same time we believe that there is a Federal role and that Federal dollars can be used and the Federal Government can basically help State and local governments to implement tougher standards that will lead to better academic achievement.

Essentially what we are trying to do with the Federal Government is to challenge the States and the local governments to do better, and I think that that is a goal that certainly makes sense for the Federal Government.

Just wanted to say, and I am going to yield to my colleagues who are here to join me tonight, that in my home State of New Jersey we have seen improved academic performance as a result of more rigorous standards. Just to give my colleagues an example, results from the October 1995 and April 1996 administrations of a high school proficiency test that we had in New Jersey for 11th and 12th graders revealed improvements in student achievements in reading, writing, and mathematics.

You can have more rigorous standards, it does work, and the partnership with the Federal Government, the State and local governments, I think, is the way to go.

And I would like to now yield to the gentleman from Arkansas who has joined me before in talking about some of these education goals that the Democrats have put forward.

Mr. SNYDER. I thank the gentleman, and I once again thank the Speaker for being with us here late into the evening.

You know, I went home during the break, and as so many Members of Congress do, and it gives you a good chance to get out in the district, and one of the places that I went to was to northern Arkansas, which is home of the great Arkansas pig-out for those of you who have not been there before. It is also the home, however, of Petit Jean College, and I want to just tell a story, if I could, about Petit Jean College.

I notice that the gentleman from North Carolina is here with us this evening because it is actually a North Carolina connection. Petit Jean had been a VO-TEC in the not too many years ago, and a group of State senators in the early or late 1980s, 1990, decided that we needed to bring Arkansas' VO-TEC schools into the 21st century so that it could prepare our students and our adults for those kinds of activities and skills that they were going to need in the future. And one of the places they went to to study was North Carolina.

I notice the gentleman from North Carolina is with us here this evening. And what they came up with was a