

Remarks Honoring the 2011 National and State Teachers of the Year
May 3, 2011

The President. Thank you, everybody. Please, have a seat. Please, have a seat.

What a beautiful day—a wonderful day to celebrate teachers and teaching. I am honored to welcome this group of outstanding teachers behind me to the White House. They are the best of the best. And even though we can never really thank teachers enough, today is a chance to offer them a small token of our appreciation for the difference they make in the lives of our children and the future of our country.

I want to start by acknowledging somebody who I think will end up being one of the greatest Secretaries of Education we've ever had, who could not be more passionate about making sure that our young people get a great start in life, and that's Arne Duncan. Give him a big round of applause.

I am very proud that we've got some wonderful Members of Congress who are here from the great State of Maryland, who I think are pretty proud of you. *[Laughter]*

As I've said before, it's not just the winners of the Super Bowl who deserve to be celebrated. And that's why I also want to welcome the teams from the National Science Bowl who are here with us today. Where are they? There you are, right back there. Good to see you. Secretary Chu told me that you all did a great job this year. So congratulations.

And finally, I want to congratulate our State and national Teachers of the Year.

Now, I'm not sure if you can tell, but it's been a while since I was in school. *[Laughter]* I haven't had to ask for a hall pass in a few years. I think it is important to note—this is off script, but the Teacher of the Year from Hawaii—where is she?—wave—teaches at the first school I ever went to, Noelani School up in Manoa in Hawaii. So I thought that was pretty cool. *[Laughter]* I went there in first grade. *[Laughter]* It's a wonderful school.

But even after all this time, I still remember the special teachers that touched my life. And we all do. We remember the way they challenged us, the way they made us feel, how they pushed us, the encouragement that they gave us, the values that they taught us, the way they helped us to understand the world and analyze it and ask questions. They helped us become the people that we are today.

For me, one of those people was my fifth grade teacher, Ms. Mabel Hefty. When I walked into Ms. Hefty's classroom for the first time, I was a new kid who had been living overseas for a few years, had a funny name nobody could pronounce. But she didn't let me withdraw into myself. She helped me believe that I had something special to say. She made me feel special. She reinforced the sense of empathy and thoughtfulness that my mother and my grandparents had tried hard to instill in me, and that's a lesson that I still carry with me as President.

Ms. Hefty is no longer with us, but I often think about her and how much of a difference she made in my life. And everybody's got a story like that, about that teacher who made the extra effort to shape our lives in important ways.

What people, I think, don't realize is just how much work and how much sacrifice it takes to make that connection. My sister is a teacher, and so I've had the occasion of just watching

her preparing lesson plans and then going out of their—her way to call that student who she thinks has potential, but is slipping away, and working with parents who maybe don't know how to support their kids. And it's tiring work, but how incredibly gratifying it must be.

Because in the end, the most effective teachers are the ones who are constantly striving to get better and help their students get better: those teachers who stay up late grading papers; the teachers who give up their afternoons and free periods to give that student a little bit of extra one-on-one help and spend evenings and weekends developing lesson plans and activities that don't just teach the material, but make it come alive; and the teachers who see the potential in students even when the students themselves don't see that potential.

And the teacher standing next to me, Michelle Shearer, I think is an example of that kind of teacher. Michelle teaches AP chemistry at Urbana High School in Maryland. Before that, she taught chemistry and math at the Maryland School for the Deaf. That's, in fact, how I just learned she got into teaching, was initially volunteering, working with deaf students.

Michelle's specialty is taking students who are normally underrepresented in science—minorities, women, students with disabilities, even students who say equations and formulas are just not their thing—and helping them discover the scientist within.

At the Maryland School for the Deaf, AP—Michelle taught AP chemistry for the first time in the school's 135-year history, explaining concepts like kinetics and electrochemistry using only her hands. When she suggested her students also sign up for AP calculus, she was met with some questioning looks. "Why?" one student asked. And she said, "Because you can," she signed back. And for the next 2 years, she spent her planning period teaching calculus, probability, and statistics to students who never would have had the opportunity to take those classes otherwise.

When Michelle moved to Urbana in 2006, 11 students were enrolled in AP chemistry. This year, there are 92. Some of her former students have gone on to become science and math teachers themselves, applying the techniques they learned in the classroom to make a tough subject manageable and fun. One student wrote, "You have not only shown me how to be the best chemistry student I can be, but also the best person I can be."

I should also mention, by the way, that Michelle's husband is an AP physics teacher and her dad and mom, who are here, your dad taught—

Michelle M. Shearer. Chemistry. He was a chemist.

The President. —chemistry. He was a chemist. So—and her mom was a music teacher. So she had a little bit of a jump on this whole teaching thing—[laughter]—and this whole science thing. But what an incredible testament when a student tells you not only you made chemistry interesting, but you made them a better person.

America will only be as strong in this century as the education that we provide our students. And at a time when our success as a nation depends on our ability to out-educate other countries, we desperately need more Michelles out there.

And that's why we've set a goal of preparing 100,000 new teachers in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math over the next decade, fields that will give students the skills they need to compete with their peers anywhere in the world. And to help those teachers succeed, I've called on Congress to move quickly to fix No Child Left Behind in a way that makes it less punitive, more focused, more flexible. That means doing a better job of preparing teachers, doing a better job of measuring their success in the classroom, helping them improve

in providing professional development, and then holding them accountable. Because if we truly believe in the importance of teachers, then we've got to help teachers become more effective.

In the words of one of my favorite poets, William Butler Yeats, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." The teachers here today and thousands like them are surrounded every day by young people who will shape our future. But it takes a special person to recognize that. It takes a special person to light that fire, to raise our children's expectations for themselves, and never give up on them no matter how challenging it might be.

All of us are here because at some point, somebody did that for us. And so today we are honored to recognize these outstanding men and women and all the teachers like them who have always had—and will continue to have—such an important impact on our lives.

So with that, I would like to present Michelle with her apple.

[At this point, the President presented the Teacher of the Year award to Ms. Shearer, who then made brief remarks.]

The President. The—*[applause]*—I think you can see why Michelle's Teacher of the Year. I think I'm going to send her up to Congress to give them a pep talk. *[Laughter]*

Thank you, everybody. This ends the ceremony, but again, we are so grateful to Michelle, but we are also grateful to all the Teachers of the Year. Give them one more big round of applause.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:58 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski and Benjamin L. Cardin; Kristen Brummel, teacher, Noelani Elementary School, Honolulu, HI; and George Shearer, husband, Phillip Meredith, father, and Beverly Meredith, mother, of Michelle M. Shearer. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng.

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