

Remarks on the No Child Left Behind Act

September 23, 2011

Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House, everybody. I see a whole bunch of people who are interested in education, and we are grateful for all the work that you do each and every day.

I want to recognize the person to my right, somebody who I think will end up being considered one of the finest Secretaries of Education we've ever had, Arne Duncan. In addition to his passion, probably the finest basketball player ever in the Cabinet. [*Laughter*]

I also want to thank Governor Bill Haslam of Tennessee for taking the time to be here today and the great work that he's doing in Tennessee. I'm especially appreciative because I found that his daughter is getting married, and he is doing the ceremony tomorrow, so we've got to get him back on time. [*Laughter*] But we really appreciate his presence. Thank you.

And a good friend, somebody who I had the pleasure of serving with during the time that I was in the United States Senate, he is now the Governor of Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee. It's wonderful to see Lincoln. Thank you all for coming.

And I do want to acknowledge two guys who've just worked tirelessly on behalf of education issues, who happen to be in the front row here: from the House, outstanding Congressman, George Miller, and from the Senate, the pride of Iowa, Tom Harkin.

Now, it is an undeniable fact that countries who out-educate us today are going to out-compete us tomorrow. But today, students are sliding against their peers around the globe. Today, our kids trail too many other countries in math, in science, in reading. And that's true, by the way, not just in inner-city schools, not just among poor kids, even among what are considered our better off suburban schools, we're lagging behind where we need to be. Today, as many as a quarter of our students aren't finishing high school. We have fallen to 16th in the proportion of young people with a college degree, even though we know that 60 percent of new jobs in the coming decade will require more than a high school diploma.

And what this means is if we're serious about building an economy that lasts, an economy in which hard work pays off with the opportunity for solid middle class jobs, we've got to get serious about education. We are going to have to pick up our games and raise our standards.

We're in the midst of an ongoing enormous economic challenge. And I spend a lot of my time thinking immediately about how we can put folks back to work and how we can stabilize the world financial markets. And those things are all important. But the economic challenges we face now are economic challenges that have been building for decades now, and the most important thing we can do is to make sure that our kids are prepared for this new economy. That's the single-most important thing we can do. So even as we focus on the near term and what we've got to do to put folks back to work, we've got to be thinking a little bit ahead and start making the tough decisions now to make sure that our schools are working the way that they need to work.

Now, we all know that schools can't do it alone. As parents, the task begins at home. It begins by turning off the TV and helping with homework and encouraging a love of learning from the very start of our children's lives. And I'm speaking from experience now. [*Laughter*]

Malia and Sasha would often rather be watching "American Idol" or "SpongeBob," but Michelle and I know that our first job, our first responsibility, is instilling a sense of learning—a sense of a love of learning in our kids. And so there are no shortcuts there; we have to do that job. And we can't just blame teachers and schools if we're not instilling that commitment, that dedication to learning, in our kids.

But as a nation, we also have an obligation to make sure that all of our children have the resources they need to learn, because they're spending a lot of time outside of the household. They're spending the bulk of their waking hours in school. And that means that we've got to make sure we've got quality schools, good teachers, the latest textbooks, the right technology. And that, by the way, is something we can do something about right away. That's why I sent the jobs bill to Congress that would put thousands of teachers back to work all across the country and modernize at least 35,000 schools.

Congress should pass that bill right now. We've got too many schools that are underresourced, too many teachers who want to be in the classroom who aren't because of budget constraints, not because they can't do the job.

So parents have a role, and schools need more resources. But money alone won't solve our education problems. I've said this before, I will repeat it: Money alone is not enough. We also need reform. We've got to make sure that every classroom is a place of high expectations and high performance. And that's been our vision since taking office. That's why instead of just pouring money into the system that's not working, we launched a competition called Race to the Top. And to all 50 States, to Governors, to school districts, we said, show us the most innovative plans to improve teacher quality and student achievement, we'll show you the money. We want to provide you more resources, but there's also got to be a commitment on your part to make the changes that are necessary so that we can see actual results.

And for less than 1 percent of what we spend on education each year, Race to the Top, under Arne's leadership, has led States across the country to raise their standards for teaching and learning. And by the way, these standards that we're talking about—these high standards that we're talking about—were not developed here in Washington. They were developed by Republican and Democratic Governors throughout the country. Essentially, you had a peer group, a peer review system, where everybody traded best practices and said, here's what seems to work, and let's hold all of our schools to these high standards. And since that's—Race to the Top has been launched, we've seen what's possible when reform isn't just a top-down mandate, but the work of local teachers and principals and school boards and communities working together to develop better standards.

And this is why, in my State of the Union Address this year, I said that Congress should reform the No Child Left Behind law based on the principles that have guided Race to the Top.

And I want to say that the goals behind No Child Left Behind were admirable, and President Bush deserves credit for that. Higher standards are the right goal. Accountability is the right goal. Closing the achievement gap is the right goal. And we've got to stay focused on those goals. But experience has taught us that in its implementation No Child Left Behind had some serious flaws that are hurting our children instead of helping them. Teachers too often are being forced to teach to the test. Subjects like history and science have been squeezed out. And in order to avoid having their schools labeled as failures, some States, perversely, have actually had to lower their standards in a race to the bottom instead of a race to the top. They

don't want to get penalized? Let's make sure that the standards are so low that we're not going to be seen failing to meet them. That makes no sense.

And these problems have been obvious to parents and educators all over the country for years now. Despite the good intentions of some—two of them are sitting right here, Tom and George—Congress has not been able to fix these flaws so far. I've urged Congress for a while now, let's get a bipartisan effort, let's fix this. Congress hasn't been able to do it. So I will. Our kids only get one shot at a decent education. They cannot afford to wait any longer. So given that Congress cannot act, I am acting.

So starting today, we'll be giving States more flexibility to meet high standards. Keep in mind, the change we're making is not lowering standards, we're saying we're going to give you more flexibility to meet high standards. We're going to let States, schools, and teachers come up with innovative ways to give our children the skills they need to compete for the jobs of the future. Because what works in Rhode Island may not be the same thing that works in Tennessee, but every student should have the same opportunity to learn and grow, no matter what State they live in.

Let me repeat: This does not mean that States will be able to lower their standards or escape accountability. In fact, the way we've structured this, if States want more flexibility, they're going to have to set higher standards, more honest standards, that prove they're serious about meeting them.

And already, 44 States, led by some of the people on this stage, have set higher standards and proposed new ways to get there, because that's what's critical. They know what's at stake here.

Ricci Hall is a principal of a charter school in Worcester, Massachusetts. Where's Ricci? Oh, Ricci's not here. [*Laughter*] He was—there he is. Ricci—I wasn't sure if he was behind me. Good. Thank you. Every single student who graduated from Ricci's school in the last 3 years went on to college. Every single one. His school ranks in the top quarter of all schools in Massachusetts, and as you know, Massachusetts's schools rank very high among the 50 States. But because Ricci's school did not meet all the technical standards of No Child Left Behind, his school was labeled a failure last year. That's not right. That needs to change. What we're doing today will encourage the progress at schools like Ricci's.

Is John Becker here? He is? All right, here's John. [*Laughter*] I didn't think you were John. [*Laughter*] John teaches at one of the highest performing middle schools in DC, and now with these changes we're making, he's going to be able to focus on teaching his fourth graders math in a way that improves their performance instead of just teaching to a test.

We have superintendents like David Estrop from Springfield, Ohio. Right here. Dave will be able to focus on improving teaching and learning in his district instead of spending all his time on bureaucratic mandates from Washington that don't actually produce results.

So this isn't just the right thing to do for our kids, it's the right thing to do for our country. We can't afford to wait for an education system that is not doing everything it needs to do for our kids. We can't let another generation of young people fall behind because we didn't have the courage to recognize what doesn't work, admit it, and replace it with something that does. We've got to act now. We've got to act now and harness all the good ideas coming out of our States, out of our schools. We can't be tied up with ideology. We can't be worrying about partisanship. We just have to make sure that we figure out what works and we hold ourselves to

those high standards. Because now is the time to give our children the skills that they need to compete in this global economy.

We've got a couple of students up on stage who are doing outstanding work because somebody in their schools is dedicated and committed every single day to making sure that they've got a chance to succeed. But I don't want them to be the exception. I want them to be the rule. Now is the time to make our education system the best in the world, the envy of the world. It used to be. It is going to be again, thanks to the people in this room.

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

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:24 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Annie Haslam, daughter of Gov. William E. Haslam of Tennessee; former President George W. Bush; Ricci W. Hall, principal, University Park Campus School; John Becker, teacher, DC Prep Public Charter School; and David C. Estrop, superintendent, Springfield City School District.

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