killed for a pair of sneakers or jewelry or a
designer jacket. In Detroit, a 15-year-old boy
was shot for his $86 basketball shoes. In Fort
Lauderdale, a 15-year-old student was robbed
of his jewelry. Just this past December in Oxon
Hill, Maryland, a 17-year-old honor student was
killed at a bus stop, caught in the crossfire
during the robbery of another student’s designer
jacket.

School uniforms are one step that may be
able to help break this cycle of violence, truancy,
and disorder by helping young students to un-
derstand that what really counts is what kind
of people they are, what’s on the inside, to re-
member that what they’re doing at school is
working, not showing off their own clothes or
envying another student’s clothes.

Two years ago Long Beach, California, was
the first school district in our Nation to require
elementary and middle school students to wear
uniforms to class. So far, the results have been
encouraging. In the first year of school uniforms,
both fights between students and students bring-
ing guns to school were cut in half. Overall
crime in the schools was cut by more than a
third. Just as encouraging was the way Long
Beach pulled together: the board of education
voting, starting a uniform program; parents ac-
tively supporting it; businesses and churches and
civic organizations helping to buy uniforms for
the students who can’t afford them; and students
using their new freedom from fear and freedom
from insecurity and freedom from envy to learn.

Aziza Walker, a fourth-grader from Long
Beach, wrote me this letter. “It is easier to
pick out what I want to wear. It’s more conven-
ient for my mom, so she won’t have to wash
so many colors. It also helps me when I walk
home with my cousin or by myself. So I won’t
get shot, beaten, or robbed by a gang or just
by some maniac on the street.”

We have a basic, old-fashioned bottom line.
We must get violence out of our schools, and
we must put discipline and learning back in
our schools. If it means teenagers will stop kill-
ing each other over designer jackets, then our
public schools should be able to require their
students to wear school uniforms. If it means
that the schoolrooms will be more orderly, more
disciplined, and that our young people will learn
to evaluate themselves by what they are on the
inside instead of what they’re wearing on the
outside, then our public schools should be able
to require their students to wear school uni-
forms.

Let me be clear: Washington will not tell
our schools what to do. We know the best teach-
er for a child is a loving parent, and the decision
whether to require uniforms should be made
by parents, by teachers, by local schools. But
if they want to do it, we want to help them
understand how it can be done. That’s why
today I signed a directive instructing the Sec-
retary of Education to distribute a new manual
on school uniforms to every school district in
the Nation. Rather than telling schools what to
do, we are providing a roadmap for setting up
the school uniform policy for schools who
choose to start one.

Every one of us has an obligation to work
together, to give our children freedom from fear
and the freedom to learn. If we act together,
we can give them the chance to make the most
of their young lives and to build better futures.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 8:15 p.m. on
February 23 at the Sheraton Miramar Hotel in
Santa Monica, CA, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on
February 24.

Remarks Prior to a Roundtable Discussion on School Uniforms in
Long Beach, California

February 24, 1996

Thank you very much, Mr. Cohn. I am here
mostly to listen to all of you. And I thank you
for taking a little time to meet with me.

I have spent an enormous amount of my time
in the last 18 years now since I became a Gov-
ernor of my State in 1986—78—in public
schools. And I devoted a lot of time as President
to how we can improve education through higher standards and higher expectations, get higher performance. It is obvious that unless the school is a safe, disciplined, drug-free learning environment, it's impossible for learning to occur.

And what we have tried to do at the national level is to encourage all kinds of grassroots reforms and to make it possible for people to do what they think is appropriate in their schools, not to tell schools how they should go about improving learning and improving the environment but to support them when they wanted to do it. And because there were some legal questions raised, I did send the Attorney General out here.

As you know, I mentioned your school district in the State of the Union Address. And today just before I came here, I signed an Executive order instructing the Secretary of Education to send to all the school districts in the country this manual that we have just done up on school uniforms—that we're going to send to all the school districts in the country, not to tell them they should do what you have done but to encourage them if they want to do it and to show them how to do it.

I also wanted to say something else. As I said, I mostly want to listen to you, but I think it's important to point out that if there is a school uniform or a dress code in a school, you not only have the chance of reducing the violence, I also think it sends a different message to the students. When young people are young, we should try to teach them to judge themselves and others based on what's inside them, not what's outside them. And in that sense, I think the school uniform policy is as valuable for students from well-to-do families as it is for students from poor families because of the message it sends.

And I'm very—I'm pleased to be here, and I wanted to come here mostly to honor you for your efforts and hopefully to publicize your efforts throughout the country. I'm also anxious to hear from the students. I have to tell you I got a lot of hot letters from students—[laughter]—after I bragged on your policy. The mail and the E-mail were burning up—[laughter]—for the next several days.

So why don't we start and just hear from everyone who is here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:02 a.m. in the library at Jackie Robinson Academy. In his remarks, he referred to Carl Cohn, superintendent, Long Beach School District.

Memorandum on the Manual on School Uniforms

February 24, 1996

Memorandum for the Secretary of Education

Subject: Manual on School Uniforms

Quality education is critical to America's future and the future of our children and families. We cannot educate our children, however, in schools where weapons, gang violence, and drugs threaten their safety. We must do everything possible to ensure that schools provide a safe and secure environment where the values of discipline, hard work and study, responsibility, and respect can thrive and be passed on to our children. Most schools are safe. But we must have zero tolerance for threats to safety in our schools. It is time to make every school the safest place in its community. Parents should be able to send their children to learn free of fear. All of our schools should be permitted to focus on their original purpose: education.

Many local school districts have made school uniforms an important part of an overall program to improve school safety and discipline. Too often, we learn that students resort to violence and theft simply to obtain designer clothes or fancy sneakers. Too often, we learn that clothing items worn at school, bearing special colors or insignias, are used to identify gang membership or instill fear among students and teachers alike.

If student uniforms can help deter school violence, promote discipline, and foster a better learning environment, then we should offer our strong support to the schools and parents that try them. We should applaud parents, teachers, and school leaders when they take courageous