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Excerpt of Remarks During the Family Re-Union VI Conference in Nashville, Tennessee

June 25, 1997

The President. Thank you. Before we begin, let me just say briefly, of all the good ideas that Al and Tipper have ever had, this might be one of the two or three best. This is an amazing thing. It's something a President always hates to admit, but this is something I had absolutely nothing to do with. [*Laughter*] This predates our partnership even. But the fact that they recognized that the welfare and strength of the American family, upon which the whole future of the country depends, is directly affected by all these big issues we often talk about—the workplace issues, the education issues, the cultural issues—and determined to bring it down to family levels, and now this for the sixth time, I think is an astonishing and, as far as I know, unique contribution to America's public life.

And so I just want to say to you, Mr. Vice President, and to Tipper and to everybody who has worked so hard on all these conferences, you've done a great thing for our country, and I'm always glad to be here. I look forward to this every year, and I'm just grateful. And of course, because this day is about parents and education, I'm especially excited about it.

[*At this point, the discussion began.*]

The President. Unlike the rest of you, I knew what we were about to hear—[*laughter*]—because Hillary went and visited the school and she came back sort of floating. When you were talking about trying to cover that third "b", I couldn't help but think that's a perfect project for the Vice President's reinventing Government endeavor. [*Laughter*]

I don't think I can add any more to what she said, but I would like to fill in a blank that maybe needs to be filled in for some of you. When Susan was talking, I asked her if her superintendent supported what she was doing, and she said yes. It's just not true everywhere that the school district supports such things or that sometimes the districts are so big they're just so overwhelmed they can't even imagine how to achieve such things.

And that is the purpose of the charter school movement that the Vice President, Secretary Riley, and I have worked so hard to support. It basically says you can create your own school within the public school system. And we have charter schools that are created in many different ways. Sometimes you just take over an existing building, and the teachers run it; sometimes a group of teachers and parents run it. But the point is, you're free to get out from under all those rules and regulations you think you have to cover yourself against.

And no one could have imagined a public school, for example, not only doing the things that were just described but actually buying out crack houses across the street or, if the parents are really poor and they want to be better role models for their kids and support them better, creating, in effect, microenterprises. And Los Angeles now has a $400 million bank that the Federal Government funded to try to help make loans to people who couldn't get loans any other way, and we'll probably be able to help to finance some of those folks.

But this is just an example of what can be done if educators and parents work together to try to create their own future in circumstances people say are hopeless. People are never in hopeless circumstances unless they have no power to do anything about it. All this charter school movement did was to give people like this remarkable woman the power to change their own lives.

So I think it's a very important component of it, and in our budget, which is part of this balanced budget amendment, we have enough funds to increase by tenfold the number of charter schools over the next 5 years. And I hope

that they'll increase by a hundredfold just by local initiatives now, as these stories get out. And then of course, the real answer is for more people to be in a situation Susan is in, where the central administration just lets them do it in the first place.

Thank you. Both of you were great.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. I'm glad you took the Governor to see "Cinderella." [*Laughter*] I hope you got him home before midnight. [*Laughter*] Don Sundquist will write me about this before the week is out; I know it. [*Laughter*]

Let me ask you something. You've already done something that I think is very important, but I would like to just reemphasize it because it underlies not only what you said but, in a different way, the presentations of everyone who has spoken before you.

There is, I think, among some policymakers and—I know we've got Mr. Purcell here who might want to talk about this in a minute—and among the general public sometimes, like when a school bond issue is being voted on or something, we have an increasing divergence between the people who have money and the people who have children in the schools—or property owners. There is, I think, this underlying assumption that these kids that are in very difficult circumstances have parents that, (a) can't do better than they're doing and (b) don't want to. And both those things are just false.

But they are in different circumstances than parents used to be, and they're going to school with different kinds of people. I just think that's worth hitting home, that you and your excuse-free center—I take it once you established your excuse-free center, you got plenty of folks that want to access it. And that is something—that's a message I would like to go out across America today. It is not true that just because somebody is poor or a first-generation immigrant or has been through some rough times in their lives, has made a mistake or two, that they do not want to do a good job, number one. And it is not true that they cannot be trained to do a good job, number two. And that's the message of your work, and I think we've got to get that out.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. Just one other point I want to make here because I think it's underlying what she's said—very important. There is a common assumption among people who are afraid of high standards that if you raise the standards, the most vulnerable children will fail more and drop out more. What she has demonstrated is that exactly the reverse is the case: If you raise the standards and you do it in the right way and you give everybody a chance to succeed, they will be more likely to stay, not more likely to quit. And I really appreciate that.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. First of all, John, thank you for establishing that fund. I'm going to be out of work in a couple years; I might apply myself. [*Laughter*]

I would like to emphasize one thing about this electronic dashboard. Now, you all haven't seen it yet, so I don't want to talk too much about it. But I want to emphasize—the fact that you're setting it up means that you believe, like all folks on this side of the stage, that all parents should be able to have access to technology and be taught to use it so they can be in communication with their children's teachers and principals. And I think that's a very important thing because a lot of school districts, in part, haven't done this because they think, "Well, maybe my parents don't speak English very well; how can they learn to use a computer?" And I think that's looking at it backwards.

So I'd like for you to just emphasize that you do not think this is just something that middle and upper middle class school districts have to use.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. I'd just like to, first of all, thank you and thank the other education reformers in Minnesota for pointing the way on the college credit initiative, which did lead to a huge increase in advanced placement, which is now being mirrored all across the country, and on public school choice and on the charter schools. And I think we were—when I was Governor of my home State, I think we were the second State to adopt a statewide school choice law. And my daughter actually took advantage of it when she was in elementary and junior high school, to the great benefit of our family and our life.

And I just want to emphasize that giving parents all these choices and all this power—the

important thing, almost none of them will choose to go outside their neighborhood or assigned district, but knowing that they have the ability to do it changes the attitude of everybody in all the districts and lifts the standards everywhere. That's the key thing here.

And the charter schools, as a practical matter—we have 500 now. We had 300 when I proposed our legislation with Secretary Riley to fund 3,000 more over the next few years. What we really are trying to do is to create a critical mass which will turn every school into a school like the first two we heard about today—first three we heard about. That's what we're trying to do. And eventually we'll hit that critical mass, wherever it is, and when we do, it will be just sort of volcanic positive change in American education. And a lot of it will have started in the State of Minnesota. I'm grateful to you.

[*The discussion continued.*]

The President. Let me say just very briefly about Secretary Riley, first of all, as you can hear him talk, he's from South Carolina. And the Vice President and I like him because he makes us sound as if we do not have an accent when we speak. [*Laughter*]

Bill Purcell said, "Sometimes Government should lead the way; sometimes Government should get out of the way." I agree with both those. Sometimes Government should support the way, and I believe that Dick Riley has been the best Secretary of Education our country ever had because he's been able to do all three things—all three things.

To go back to what Yvonne said at the beginning, there is no telling how many rules and regulations that Secretary Riley has gotten rid of to give the decisionmaking power back to local school districts and, to some extent, to States and ultimately to local schools. And we feel very strongly we should be doing that even as we give more support for these reform needs. And he has really done a wonderful job, and I'm very grateful to him.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:25 a.m. in Langford Auditorium at Vanderbilt University during Family Re-Union VI: Family and Learning. In his remarks, he referred to Susan Gingrich-Cameron, principal, Carson Lane Academy, Murfreesboro, TN; Gov. Don Sundquist of Tennessee; Bill Purcell, director, Child and Family Policy Center, Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies; John Doerr, partner, Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield and Byers, Menlo Park, CA; and Yvonne Chan, principal, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, San Fernando, CA.

Remarks to the Family Re-Union VI Conference in Nashville

June 25, 1997

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President. We built in a little time on the other end of the schedule because I knew that we'd all want to stay here longer. I'm reluctant to say anything; those 12 people were so good.

I'm reminded of the very first time I made a speech as an elected public official, more than 20 years ago now. It was at a Rotary Club in southeast Arkansas, and it was one of these officers banquets, you know, it was one of those things where we start at 6:30, and I was introduced to speak at a quarter to 10. [*Laughter*] There were 500 people there; all but 3 were introduced. They went home mad. [*Laughter*] And the only guy in the audience—in the whole crowd more nervous than me was the fellow that was supposed to introduce me. He didn't know what to say. He was nervous, too. And so I get ready to be introduced, and the guy comes up, and his opening line is—after all the officers had been inducted, all the awards had been given, everybody had been recognized, his opening line is—in my first speech as an elected public official—is, "You know, we could have stopped here and had a very nice evening." [*Laughter*] Now, I know he didn't mean it that way. [*Laughter*] And I could have said that about myself now. We could stop right here and have had a very nice session.

What I would like to do just very briefly is to try to put this whole—what we've been talking about today in the larger context of what America is trying to do and what our responsibility is at the national level, because when