

May 4 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

of that most people would. So in that sense, I think things are better today.

Now, violence was having a fist-fight on the playground. Nobody had a gun. So there was less fear. The only thing you ever had to fear was whether somebody that hated you was going to beat you up. You never had the fear that somebody would pull a knife or a gun. So I'd say those were the differences.

But if you look, on balance, we're better off today than we were when I was in grade school. We just have to deal with today's challenges. There will never be a time that's perfect and without challenges. But we're better off being integrated than segregated. We're better off with the new technology. We're better off with the assumption that we ought to try to prepare every kid and give every child the chance to go to college. That's my view.

Ms. Smith. As you see from the number of questions, we could do this all day, but we're out of time.

The President. These are great questions—I mean, great.

Ms. Smith. Aren't they great? There are so many, one after the other.

The President. I wish that they all had yes/no answers; I'd just run down. [*Laughter*]

Ms. Smith. You know what, they can all E-mail you, right? [*Laughter*] Just kidding.

Well, I want to thank you so much for being here, Mr. President. This was a treat. I want to also thank the distinguished guests that were here, thank City Academy, thank Yahoo! for providing this chat auditorium, and of course, all of the students across the country who logged in and participated in this. Sorry we couldn't get to all of you. Great questions.

The President. Thank you. Great job. Thank you.

NOTE: The question-and-answer session was taped at 10:13 a.m. in gymnasium at the City Academy and was broadcast on-line via the Internet. In his remarks, the President referred to Tomas Gonzalez, 1994 City Academy graduate.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Reforming America's Schools in Columbus, Ohio

May 4, 2000

[*Barbara Blake, principal, Eastgate Elementary School, welcomed participants and outlined improvements in student performance at her school. She then introduced the President, noting that she had requested information on educational reform from him while he was Governor of Arkansas.*]

The President. Thank you very much, Ms. Blake. I guess I should begin by saying I'm certainly glad I answered that letter—[*laughter*—so many years ago. I want to thank you for welcoming me here. And thank you, Mayor Coleman, for your leadership and for welcoming me also. Thank you, Superintendent Rosa Smith; Representative Beatty; City Council President Habash; House Minority Leader Ford. I'd like to thank the leaders of the Columbus and Ohio Education Association, John Grossman and Gary Allen, who are here. And I'd like to thank all of our panelists who are here.

I have been on a tour these last 2 days to highlight the good things that are happening in education in America, to highlight the reforms that make these good things possible, and most important, to highlight the great challenge before the United States today to turn around all low-performing schools and give all of our children a world-class education.

Yesterday morning I was in western Kentucky in the little town of Owensboro, which has had extraordinary success in turning around its lowest performing schools. In 1996, the State identified 175 of them. Just 2 years later, 159—over 90 percent—had improved beyond the goals the State set for them. In the little school I visited, where two-thirds of the children were eligible for free and reduced lunches, in 4 years they had recorded the same sort of improvements that you mentioned here, on a trend line, which proves that income and station in life are not destiny, that all of our children can

learn, that intelligence is equally distributed. And that means the grownups among us have a big responsibility to give every single one of these kids, like those beautiful, bright-eyed kids that I saw in this school—and I just shook hands with every one of them—have a chance to live up to their dreams.

Then after I left Kentucky yesterday, I went to Davenport, Iowa, and I visited a 93-year-old high school finally beginning to get the renovations it needs so that students have the learning environment they need. Some of those school rooms didn't even have electrical outlets in the wall. And believe it or not, it was even hotter in the gym there than it is here today. [Laughter] So I'm just as cool as a cucumber now.

This morning I was in the Nation's first charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is providing an excellent education to students who were not succeeding in other public schools. That was the first charter school in the country, established in 1992. They were basically schools within the public school system set up by teachers and parents and citizens with a specific, definite mission, and schools that can be shut down if they fail in that mission.

There was one in the whole country, that one I visited today, in '72. We've invested \$500 million since then, and there are now 1,700, providing excellence in education to special needs of the people and their communities. And while I was there, I actually had a Website Chat on the Internet with students all across America about the challenges in education. And in a matter of about 20 minutes, they sent me over 10,000 questions. [Laughter] So don't let anybody say the young people of America are not curious. They could ask faster than I could answer.

I really can think of no better place to wrap up my tour than here in Columbus, which has had a long history of educational intervention and innovation and excellence. In 1909, Columbus opened the Nation's very first junior high school. And now, again, you're on the cutting edge of reform and improvement.

I'm here today primarily not to talk but to listen to the panelists here about what you're doing right. But I want to say, for the benefit of the country and through the press who are here, that this community has implemented high academic standards and assessments to see if the students and the schools are meeting those

standards. They've given students help to meet those standards, from after-school programs to smaller classes. Their strategy, which is our strategy in the Clinton-Gore administration, of investing more and demanding more, is working.

Now, you heard our principal talk about the advances. Just in the last 3 years, the test scores have skyrocketed. And the test scores themselves have gone up more than 200 percent but—I don't know if you listened to that—the percentage of students doing an acceptable job—listen to this—in one year—she talked about 2 years ago and last year, not this year—in one year went up almost 500 percent in reading, over 300 percent in math, and 300 percent in science—in one year. All children can learn.

I want to say a special word of appreciation to the teachers who I also met outside and to those of you who work to improve the quality of the teacher corps. Listen to this: More than a third of these teachers have a master's degree and over 10 years' experience teaching. I understand your peer assistance and review program is helping both new and veteran teachers to do better by learning from each other, something I very much believe in.

And this is very important: You have cut the attrition rate of first-year teachers by 40 percent. This is terrifically important because we have so many teachers who will be retiring in America in the next few years, and we have the largest number of students in our schools in history. So reducing the attrition rate is a big deal and something you should be very proud of.

While there is still more work to be done here and, indeed, in every school in the country, you have proved that with the right ideas and the right tools, you can do what needs to be done.

Since 1993, our administration has worked hard to make education our number one priority, not just in a speech but in reality. And I must say, I don't know that I have ever been more touched by anything I have ever seen in any school in my life as I was when I looked up—hanging from the ceiling on the corridor when I came down here—and you had put up a history of what our administration had done since January of '93 in education. I was completely blown away. I dare say that outside of Hillary, the Vice President, and Secretary Riley, you now know more about what we have done than anybody else in America. [Laughter]

But let me just briefly review a couple of the things that I think are important. When I came in office, we had a \$295 billion deficit. Interest rates were high. Unemployment was high. We had to get rid of the deficit. We had to keep doing things. We got rid of hundreds of programs. And as we turned a deficit into 3 years of surpluses, now this year we will have paid off \$355 billion of the national debt, well on our way to getting America out of debt entirely, for the first time since 1835. We have doubled our investment in education and training. And I think that's very important.

But we also said to people that got Federal aid to education, "If you want this Federal aid, you have to have high standards for what your children should know." We've given the States the resources they need to help schools implement those standards. We've required States to identify their low-performing schools and come up with strategies to turn them around.

We've helped to reduce class size in the early grades with our program, now in its third year, to provide 100,000 new, highly trained teachers in the first 3 grades. I'm happy to say that 55 of those teachers are now in Columbus, 2 here at Eastgate. And this community has taken the average class size in grades one through 3 from nearly 25 down to 15. That is, doubtless, one reason you're seeing these big improvements in students' performance, and again I applaud you for that.

When I became President, there was no Federal support for summer school programs. All these studies would show the kids that were having trouble learning forgot a lot of what they did learn over the summer. And then the teachers would have to spend 4, 6, sometimes as many as 8 weeks reviewing what was done the year before, before they could even start on what they were being held responsible to teach in the new year.

We went from a \$1 million program in 1997 to \$20 million in '98, to \$200 million in '99, to \$450 million this year. And my budget asks for a billion dollars. If the Congress will give it to me, we will be able to guarantee summer school opportunities to every student in every low-performing school in the entire United States of America. It is terribly important that we pass this.

What you have done here—I know that 30 fourth graders in this school participate in such programs. I said summer school; I meant after-

school, although the funds can also be used for summer school. I just came from Minneapolis, where a third of all their students are now in summer school programs, in the entire school district. Why? Because they have so many people who are coming from other countries whose first language is not English. They would never even have a chance to not only master the language but learn what they need to learn if summer school weren't made available to them. So the after-school and the summer school programs are important.

We're trying to build or radically overhaul 6,000 schools and to modernize another 5,000 over the next 5 years—5,000 a year. We now—when I became President, we had only 3 percent of our classrooms and 16 percent of our schools connected to the Internet. Today, we have nearly 75 percent of the classrooms and 95 percent of the schools with at least one Internet connection with the E-rate, which the Vice President pioneered, that gives a \$2 billion subsidy so that poorer schools and poorer communities can afford to have their schools log on to the Internet.

So we're working on it. I have sent Congress an education accountability act that basically seeks to ratify what you're doing. It says: Set high standards; enforce them. End the practice of social promotion, but don't punish the kids for the failures of the system. Give after-school programs; give summer school programs. The kids can learn. We see it here. Have a system that works. And I hope that this will pass this year.

And let me just make two final points. As your principal said, I've been working at this a long time. I've been in a lot of schools, and I never get tired of going into them. I've shaken hands with a lot of kids, and I'll never get tired of shaking hands with them. They make us all perpetually young.

But I can tell you this: There is a world of difference between what we know now and what we knew in 1979, when Secretary Riley and I started in education reform. And there is a world of difference between what we know now and what we knew in 1983, when the "Nation At Risk" report was issued and when Hillary and I passed our first sweeping reforms at home in Arkansas.

We know what works. You're seeing what works in this school. What does that mean? It means again that the adults among us no longer

have an excuse not to give these opportunities to every child in America, because now we know what works.

The second thing I'd like to say is, with the strongest economy in our history, the great test the American people face this year in the elections—and those of us who are elected officials—and as citizens is, what is it that we mean to do with this prosperity? If we're not going to do this now, when in the wide world will we ever get around to doing it? We're in the best shape economically we've ever been in. We can afford to do it, no matter what anybody says. And I think we ought to get about the business of doing it.

So that's why I came here, why I wanted to hear from all of you. And what the purpose of this panel is, is to sort of fill in the blanks of my remarks here so that we will have a clear sense of how far you've come, how you did it, and what we need to do from here on out.

Thank you very much.

Now, I would like to begin by asking your superintendent to speak a little, maybe in a little greater detail than I did in my remarks or even than Principal Blake did in hers, and talk about how did you decide to do what you're doing, and what exactly are you doing to turn around low-performing schools? That's the big issue in the whole country.

And let me just make one other comment. I've been in hundreds of schools in so many States. Nearly every problem you could ever dream of in American education has been solved by somebody somewhere. The real problem with American education is we never get our solutions to scale; that is, we don't take what we're doing really right for some people and keep on at it until it's being done for everybody, for all the kids.

And there seems to me to be a real systematic effort here. So that's what I would like for you to talk about, Dr. Smith, in whatever way you want.

[*Rosa A. Smith, superintendent, Columbus Public Schools, described the district's strategy to improve its schools.*]

The President. Yes, give her a hand. [*Applause*] That's great. Let me just emphasize one thing she said because, unless you've heard people say these things a lot, it would be easy to miss. She said that there were three clearly defined goals, and then the second point she

made I think is very important. She said, "We are using a research-based approach." That means—that's a nice way of saying what I said in more crude language, that you don't have to sort of fire a shotgun at this problem anymore. It's not like we don't know what works. There is lots and lots of research available today as a result of the serious efforts of the last 20 years.

And one of the reasons that we have not had the kind of systematic results that we're seeing here around the country is that people don't take the research and really act on it. And it's interesting, because there is hardly any other endeavor of your life that you would ignore that in. If you were starting a business and 15 people had succeeded doing a certain thing and 3 people had failed doing the reverse, you wouldn't say, "Well, I think I'll see if I can't make money doing what the three did. I think I can do it a little better."

So I think that Columbus deserves a lot of credit. I'd like to follow up by asking your principal, Barbara Blake—you've been a principal for a good while. As you pointed out, you wrote me when I was Governor and asked me about some of the things we were doing. Why do you think what you're doing now is working so much better?

[*Ms. Blake attributed the improvement to smaller class size and mentor support for teachers.*]

The President. Just to give you some idea of what she said, I went through those numbers a minute ago, but I can't think of how you could possibly explain a 500 percent increase in the percentage of kids reading at the appropriate level in a year other than more individual attention by someone who is a good teacher and knows how to do it.

And let me say, in this little class I visited in Kentucky yesterday, this elementary school class, all the kids and I took turns reading a chapter from the wonderful book "Charlotte's Web." And I made every child read a couple paragraphs. And some of those paragraphs are pretty tough for kids in the third grade, you know, and they all got through it. In 4 years, they had almost a tenfold increase. And you'll do even better than that, at the rate you started. So I think this is very important. I think the smaller classes really do amount to something.

I'd like to ask Heather Knapp to speak next. She is a teacher at East Linden Elementary,

and she was hired with the help of our class size reduction funds as a first grade teacher. And she teaches a class of 18 first graders, along with a 25-year veteran of the Columbus Public Schools, Karen Johnson. And you, too, have, I understand, a large immigrant population in your school. So I'd like for you to talk a little about what the impact of children whose first language is not English is and the educational process and what you're doing.

[Heather Knapp said that reduced class size enabled teachers to work with students in small groups and on a one-to-one basis and to spend time helping them to assimilate.]

The President. My notes—and they're not always right, but they usually are—my notes say that if you didn't have these class size reduction funds to hire more teachers, that you and your team teacher, Ms. Johnson, would be each teaching, separately, first grade classes with more than 30 students in them. And if that's true, there would be no way in the world you could deal with all these children whose first language is not English.

Ms. Knapp. No.

The President. Yes, that's pretty straightforward. [Laughter]

Ms. Knapp. As a first-year teacher, I believe, no. [Laughter]

The President. I think many Americans have no idea just how diverse these student bodies are now. Like I said, I just came from Minneapolis/St. Paul. We think about that as sort of the capital of Norwegian America. And it still is. But there are children in the Minneapolis/St. Paul school district, combined, with native languages in excess of 100, counting all the people who come from the different African and Southeast Asian peoples who are there. And the same thing is happening all over America.

Now, a lot of these kids, once they're here for about 18 months, if they get good basic grounding, start to do very well indeed. And since we're living in a global economy in an increasingly global society, this is a great advantage for the United States. We should be thrilled by this. This is going to put us in a very good position to do very well when all these children get out of school. Ten years, 20 years, 30 years from now, our country will be the best positioned country in the entire global society if, but only if, we take care of these kids now.

Sometimes people back in Washington ask me why I spend so much time on this. You know, when Barbara introduced me, she said, "the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces" and all that. I think this is a national security issue for America. I think it's an important part of our long-term security. So I want you to keep plugging.

I'd like to ask the president of the Columbus Education Association now to talk a little bit about your teacher development strategies. Everybody who becomes a teacher knows that he or she is not going to become wealthy, but it's important to pay them enough so that they can afford to stay. But it's more than pay. People also want to feel that they're doing their job well. Most people like to get up in the morning and look forward to going to work and believe that what they do is important and know they're doing it well. And that feeling is more important for teachers probably than any other single group in our society.

So I'd like to ask Mr. Grossman to talk a little bit about how this peer assistance review program works and how it contributes to teacher quality.

[John Grossman described how the peer assistance review program provided mentors for support, training, and evaluation of first-year teachers, in partnership with the union, administrators, and Ohio State University.]

The President. Let me just follow up on that a little bit. Again, this is one of those issues—it's very hard—for example, we've got all these folks here who are reporting on this today, and it's very hard to have a blaring headline across the Columbus paper tomorrow, with an exclamation point, "Columbus Committed Only To Use Research-Based Strategies!" or "Peer Review and Assistance the Main Thing!" It doesn't have the edge, like "Clinton Robs a Liquor Store!" or something. [Laughter]

As a result of that, we often overlook what matters most. But let me just tell you this. We forget how much our teachers need support and training and the time and resources to do that. I think a lot of times we just assume that, well, if you went through school and you got good grades in math and you went to an education college and you took those courses, well, obviously you can teach math. We forget, unless we've actually seen how hard they work, how much time it takes for these teachers just to

get through the day, to deal with the children, give them as much individual attention as possible, give the tests, grade the tests, deal with all the other stuff they have to deal with.

I can only tell you, most people believe the United States military is a pretty efficient operation, and we fought an air war in Kosovo and didn't lose a single pilot. But let me tell you, we did lose pilots. They didn't die in that war; they were pilots that die every year in the military training of the country. And we spend a lot of your tax money just training people relentlessly, over and over and over again. We don't assume that some people are smart and some people are dumb and some people can do it and some people can't. We assume in the military that the people we accept and the people we train are capable of doing the mission that they are assigned. We don't even assume that you're either a born leader or not, and if you're not born one, you can't lead. We train people to lead, too, in the military, and they lead. And a lot of people who would never be picked as leaders, the whole time they're born until the time they join the military, wind up performing superbly.

If you look at the best run companies, they invest huge amounts of time and money in developing the capacities of their people. And we have never done this for our teachers in the sort of systematic way that we should, setting aside the time we should, investing the money in it we should. And again, it's a very hard thing for—the mayor can run for election, somebody can run for the school board, or somebody can run for President, and it's the last thing you'll ever see them say, because you can't turn it into a headline with an exclamation or a 30-second television ad. But it matters.

That's why I wanted John to talk about it. It is so important. And it means something to the teachers. It's a way of reaffirming their significance and their capacity to grow in satisfying their own intellectual hunger. Any time you think training doesn't matter for education—suppose I would say to you, "I've got a way to give you a bigger tax cut; we'll cease all training operations in the military, and we'll just take smart people and see how they do." [Laughter] So this is very, very important. And I thank you for that.

Mr. Mayor, tell me, what has the mayor got to do with the schools here? [Laughter] What is it you're trying to do?

Mayor Michael B. Coleman of Columbus. I'm asked that question often, Mr. President. [Laughter]

The President. They ask me, too, all the time. [Laughter]

[*Mayor Coleman discussed the city's efforts to create and fund quality after-school programs.*]

The President. Let me just say, I think that—first, I think you're to be commended, and I assure you that I will be fighting as hard as I can to get the appropriation doubled again. But as I said, in 1997, I got a million dollars out of the Congress to plan for a Federal after-school program. And then we went from \$20 million to \$200 million to \$450 million in 3 years. And we estimate that if we can get up to a billion dollars a year in Federal support for after-school, at least we'll be able to give cities like Columbus enough money to target all the schools where either the performance is the most disappointing or you have the highest percentage of low income kids.

But I think you will want to do more than that, and you'll probably have to make a case to the business community and others that it's a good economic investment for the city. But again I'll say, particularly if you have a lot of immigrant children, it's really important. These kids need as much time as they can to master the language so they can begin to learn all the other things they need to learn. And they just cannot do it in the regular day, in the regular school year.

And I'll do what I can to help you. But I think you deserve it. I think you've made the right decision about what's best for you.

Mayor Coleman. Thank you very much.

The President. I would like to call on a parent now, a stakeholder in this enterprise. Linda Hoetger—is that right? I studied German in college. [Laughter] Linda and her husband, Ray, have four sons, all in the Columbus public school system. Both of them volunteer to work in the school system. And their 9-year-old son at East Columbus Elementary School got a Federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant to start an after-school program. So I'd just like for her to talk to us about her work in the after-school program at her son's school. How does it work; how did it start; what does she do; what is your view of the role of parents in this?

But I would really like to begin just by thanking you and your husband for your support for the schools and for your willingness to give your time. I'd like for you to talk about what you do.

[*Linda Hoetger described her experiences as a volunteer for the after-school programs, offering students tutoring and standardized test preparation services.*]

The President. Is all the after-school work at the school where you work designed toward helping prepare them for the test or giving them homework assistance? Are there any other kind of things—

[*Ms. Hoetger said the program also offered violence prevention classes.*]

The President. I think this is really important. If I might just say, again, I've talked to a lot of young people in a lot of schools about violence, obviously because of all the very high profile tragedies we've had in our schools.

But I think it's worth pointing out that in spite of those high profile tragedies, gun violence in America is down 35 percent since 1993. And violence in the schools has declined. And I think one of the principle reasons is involving more young people in peer programs and training more young people—young people, like the rest of us—people model the behavior they see, either at home or they learn on television or in some other way. People are not born knowing how to resolve their anger, their frustration, their conflicts in a non-violent way. And if they don't have models, if they have either destructive models or no models at all, you run the risk of having a higher incidence of violence. So I wanted you to talk about this because I also think this is very important.

Again, the more diverse the student body becomes, the more likely there are to be moments when people who won't understand each other because their backgrounds will be so different, their experiences will be so different. And when those moments come, it's very, very important that young people at least have been given a chance to know that there's some other way to resolve their differences—also that they don't have to bury them, because that also becomes a big problem. I mean, a lot of these kids that do really bad things are too far gone when the times they do it, but it's only after years and years and years and years of internalizing things

that, had they not been buried, the children might have been saved.

So I think that you deserve a lot of credit for that, too, and I think that should be a part of every school's effort, and I thank you for it.

I want to now talk to Laura Avalos-Arguedas, who is an AmeriCorps volunteer with the City Year program in Columbus. She was born in Costa Rica and moved to the United States when she was 6 years old. She graduated from Grandview Heights High School in 1998 and began a 2-year volunteer program in City Year, where she tutors four first grade students in reading at the Second Avenue Elementary School. So I'd like for her to talk about that.

And I just want to say, I don't know that I have done anything as President that I'm any more proud of than establish the AmeriCorps program. We've now had over 150,000 young people like Laura spend one or 2 years in this program, working in communities—sometimes in their home communities, sometimes half a nation away—and at the process, earning money for college. In the first 4 years of AmeriCorps, we had more people than we had in the first 20 years of the Peace Corps. And it's just been an amazing thing.

So I'd like for you, Laura, to talk about why did you decide to become a volunteer in the City Year program, and how do you feel about the mentoring you're doing and the relationships you're building with the students? And do you think it's improving their learning?

[*Laura Avalos-Arguedas described her experience with the City Year program and commented on how popular the after-school program was with students.*]

The President. Mr. Mayor, I think if she had 140 kids show up with 7 corps members, she just made the strongest case for your after-school initiative. [*Laughter*]

Mayor Coleman. I think she has.

The President. I think you need to make her witness A in your—

Ms. Avalos-Arguedas. We have to cut down.

[*Mayor Coleman pointed out the growing need for more after-school programs.*]

The President. I want to go now to a product of another program I'm very proud of that I did not start. It existed in the Government when I became President, but we have dramatically

expanded it. It's called the Troops to Teachers program, where people who have served in the military, when they retire or when they leave the military, then move into teaching. And in an environment in which a lot of our kids come from difficult home situations, I think that the Troop to Teachers program has made a big impact in a lot of places.

Eastgate Elementary has a teacher who came out of 20 years in the Air Force, Darrell Bryon. He's here with us today. And I'd like for him to talk a little bit about what made him decide to switch careers. He doesn't look old enough to have been in the Air Force 20 years. I don't know if he was honest about his age when he joined. [Laughter] And he teaches a fourth-fifth grade split class. I'd like for him to talk a little bit about how his previous experience helps him in the classroom.

Mr. Bryon.

[Darrell Bryon explained how his military experience helped to prepare him for the demands of teaching.]

The President. When you told that story about your student sort of talking back to you, I thought to myself, his training in the military has qualified him to be a teacher; his experience as a teacher may have qualified him to be President. [Laughter] So I can really identify with that.

Harry Truman once said that being President was a job in which you spent most of your time trying to talk people into doing things they should do without your having to ask them in the first place. [Laughter] But I thank you for your dedication.

Let me now call on Shirley Goins, who is a teacher in the Monroe Middle School, a sixth-grade teacher. And she has worked as a teacher for 30 years. She's taught at Monroe the last 18. And Monroe recently instituted a school uniform policy which required the children to wear white shirts and blue bottoms, and the parents of the students supported it.

When I started supporting these several years ago, some people derided me as being for a little idea that a President shouldn't be paying attention to, but I was inclined to disagree. And I would like for Shirley to talk a little bit about why her school adopted this policy, and what its effect on discipline and academic achievement and the way the students relate to each other has been.

[Shirley Goins described how the uniform policy helped students to focus on their work, rather than being distracted by frivolous clothing styles.]

The President. That's great. You know, when I started—my wife is the first person who ever talked to me about school uniforms. She's always been for them. She's a fanatic supporter of—now, I guess now that she's a candidate for office, I shouldn't use the word “fanatic.” [Laughter] Subject to being used against her, I suppose. But we talked about it a lot for young kids.

And the first place I went to explore this was Newport Beach, California, which is the third biggest school district in California. And when the junior high schools adopted it out there, the middle schools, they did it in self-defense, because they had a lot of gangs. So they picked colors to dress in that would protect the kids. All the gangs wore red and blue, so all the uniforms were something other than red and blue. And then all the schools got to pick their own colors and do whatever they wanted.

But I had two children talking to me about it, one young man who came from a difficult circumstance who told me it was the first time he felt safe walking to school in 2 years, and one young woman who was in a much better situation economically, where she said she felt like she had been liberated, that neither she nor her classmates could look down on or feel looked down on as a result of the clothes they wore. They were no longer distracted, and they felt good. They were looking forward to going to high school where they wouldn't have to do it anymore, but they thought it had really calmed the atmosphere in the school and that learning had increased and discipline problems had decreased. I thought it was a very interesting.

Between Hillary and those kids, I've been pretty well sold on it ever since. [Applause] Yes, one person agrees with me in the crowd. [Laughter] Is this a school-by-school option in the Columbus school district?

Ms. Goins. Yes, Mr. President, it is not required. It is a school community decision with parents.

The President. Now, how many schools have uniform policies in this—

Ms. Goins. Mr. President, I cannot answer that question. [Laughter]

The President. Does anybody know? Are there others? But there is more than one?

Ms. Goins. There are others. There are several—many, I would say.

The President. I think, by the way, that's a good decision. I think if you have it district-wide, then you've got to—there you go, good for you, looks great. That looks great. I think you either have to—if it's going to be a district-wide decision, it's got to be handled just the way it would be school by school. It's a very delicate thing. It only works if the parents are for it and if the kids buy into it. Even if they have reservations, they've got to buy into it. So it's better not something that somebody like me decides is the right thing to do.

What we tried to do is to show people how to do it, including how districts have dealt with the families who couldn't afford to buy the uniforms, where they got the money, how they did all that sort of stuff. But I do think it has some merit.

[*Ms. Goins concurred that parents and students needed to agree on the policy.*]

The President. Now, what school do you represent in your uniform?

Student. I represent Columbus—

The President. Good for you. That's a great looking uniform. Thank you. I have been hissed and cheered by students talking about this. [Laughter]

Mayor Coleman. You're only going to be cheered here in Columbus, Mr. President. [Laughter]

The President. Is there anything else anybody would like to say? Is there anybody in the audience wants to ask anybody on the panel a question? Yes, sir?

Q. Mr. President, I was wondering if Al Gore, if he becomes the next President, will be continuing your policies and ideals, because they are excellent.

The President. Yes, he actually—he's been outlining his education program, and I would say that there are a couple of areas, obviously, because he can look ahead 4 years beyond what I can argue for. One of the things that he believes, in addition—he has supported our educational accountability fund that I just explained and all these things I talked about. And he's going to have—he's actually giving a whole speech tomorrow on teacher quality, which I hope you will follow. He's been working very

hard on it and talking to people around the country, educators and others.

In addition to that, in the primary, he came out for a program to add another several hundred thousand teachers, federally funded, to the 100,000 that we've already provided. We're very concerned that over the next decade another 2 million teachers will retire as the number of students continues to swell. And so we think it—you know, I agree—but he came and talked to me about this. He didn't—it was entirely his idea, not mine. But he said, "I think I'm going to go out there and advocate that we take a certain percentage of this surplus and just dedicate it to helping the communities hire teachers." Once we get the 100,000 in there, so we know we can get an average class size of 20 in the early grades, the rest—we're just going to be killing ourselves to get properly qualified teachers in the classroom because people retire.

And so I think you could feel every confidence that he would support the things that have been done, but that he would build on them and do better. That's what I think will happen.

[*A participant said a student had commented that the President would be a tough act to follow.*]

The President. Well, I appreciated his saying that. But the truth is that the country is changing a lot economically, and let me try to put this education issue that we've been talking about here into the larger context.

When I became President in 1992—and the people of Ohio were good enough to vote for me and the Vice President—the big issue was how could we turn the country around. The economy was in a shambles. The crime was exploding. The welfare rates were exploding. Things didn't seem to be working. And so in the last 7 years, I've tried to look to the long-term challenges of the future, but first we had to get the ship of state righted. Things had to be working.

Now, you're not very cynical anymore about whether you can actually make things better. I mean, if you look at—you know, we've gone from a big deficit to a big surplus. We're paying down the debt. We've got the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years. The welfare rolls have been cut in half. Crime is down to a 25-year

low. Poverty is at a 20-year low; African-American, Hispanic unemployment the lowest ever recorded; female unemployment the lowest in 40 years.

I say that to say, nobody questions whether we have the capacity as a people to improve. Nationwide, reading and math scores are up about a grade level. But in places where there's been a sharp focus on results and on turning around low-performing schools like Columbus, the results are much more dramatic, but they're up. We have—90 percent of our kids are immunized against serious diseases for the first time. We've—all the environmental indicators are better.

So the question that the country faces now is a very different question than it faced in 1992. The question we face now is, what is it that we propose to do with this moment of unprecedented prosperity? The question, by the way, also is not whether you're going to change. The world is changing so fast, America will change. It will change just as much in the next 4 years as it has in the previous 4 and the 4 before that. So the question is not whether you're going to change. The question is how you're going to change.

You know, if the Vice President were running for President and he said, "Vote for me; I'll do everything Bill Clinton did," I wouldn't vote for him, because the world's going to be different. That's not—his message is that, "Look, this approach works, so we ought to change by building on it. And here's how I'll build on it. I don't think we ought to abandon the approach in economics and education and health care and welfare reform and all these issues, but we're going to have to change." And my take on this as a citizen, as well as somebody with some experience now in these affairs, is that the way to decide what direction you want to take is to first ask yourself, where would you like to go?

I remember one of the funniest things Yogi Berra used to say is that we may be lost, but we're making good time. [*Laughter*] I mean, you've got to ask yourself, where would you like to go? Now, my opinion is—and again, it's not going to be on my watch, but my opinion is that for the first time in at least 35 years, since we had this kind of economy again—which basically came apart in the Vietnam war and the civil rights crisis and a lot of other problems we had in the country in the 1960's—this is

the first time we've had since then to say, okay, here's where we want to go, and here's what we're going to do to get there.

So my view is, one of our goals ought to be to guarantee that every child in this country will have access to a world-class education; that everybody will be able to afford to go to college if they're otherwise qualified; that poverty among children can be eliminated within through the tax system and other supports; that every working family ought to be able to at least have access to affordable health insurance; that we will deal with the challenges that the aging of America—when the baby boomers retire and there's only two people working for every one person drawing Social Security—we will act now, not then, to save Social Security and Medicare and add a prescription drug benefit that's voluntary for the seniors—big challenges.

On the environmental front, we have to tackle this whole issue of global warming. You're all in here fanning yourselves; the truth is that the climate of this Earth is going up at a very difficult rate. Now that may seem like an obscure issue, because Columbus is way inland, but it's not going to be very funny if the polar icecaps keep melting and the oceans rise and the sugarcane fields in Louisiana and the Florida Everglades were buried and the agricultural production of America starts to go north and the whole framework of life here is changed—and people in Africa start getting even more cases of malaria and children dying from dehydration. This is a big issue.

So that's what I gave my State of the Union about. But I think what all you need to decide as citizens is, what do you want for your kids? What do you want for your families? What do you want for your future? Where do you want to go? Then you have to say—8 years ago, I wouldn't have believed that we could write the future of our dreams. But now I know America can work.

So again, it's kind of like school reform. We don't have an excuse anymore for not saying what would we like America to be like when our children are our age, because we know we can make America better now. We don't have an excuse; we know that. So every one of you—I wish you'd go home and take a piece of paper and say, what would I like America to look like in 10 years? And then, how does America

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have to change—not whether, but how—to get there?

That's how you'll know who to vote for. That's how you know what ideas you think work. To ask yourself, where do you want to go? And my earnest plea to the American people this year is to do that, so we can take on these big challenges, because that's what I've been working for. I've been working for the day that when I left office, this country would have both the self-confidence and the capacity to build the future of our dreams for our children. And

we can do it now. That's what I think we ought to be doing.

[Dr. Smith and Mayor Coleman thanked the President for his participation.]

The President. Thank you all.

NOTE: The roundtable began at 4:40 p.m. in the East Room at Eastgate Elementary School. In his remarks, the President referred to State Representative Joyce Beatty; City Council President Matthew D. Habash; State House Minority Leader Jack Ford; and Gary Allen, vice president, Ohio Education Association.

Statement on Africa and Caribbean Basin Trade Legislation

May 4, 2000

Today's vote is a key milestone toward enactment of legislation that will launch a new era of cooperation between the United States and our partners in Africa and the Caribbean Basin. This important measure will strengthen our economic partnership with these nations, lower

trade barriers, help developing nations to lift their people out of poverty, and create a more secure world. I congratulate those Members of Congress who have worked hard to reach agreement on this bill. I look forward to signing this historic legislation into law upon final passage.

Message on the Observance of Cinco de Mayo, 2000

May 4, 2000

Warm greetings to everyone celebrating Cinco de Mayo.

This annual celebration of the Mexican Army's triumph at the Battle of Puebla reminds us all of Mexico's long-standing commitment to the ideals of freedom and self-determination. United by our common convictions, the United States and Mexico have long enjoyed warm ties of friendship and mutual respect, and in recent years, our two nations have worked hard to cultivate this increasingly close partnership. From the arts to business to education to the environment, citizens of the United States and Mexico are gaining a greater understanding and a new appreciation of each other, increasing our prospects for a future of peace and prosperity.

We must continue working to open new bridges of friendship and cooperation. This is a promising time for the Americas, and we have an historic opportunity to build our collective economic strength, improve the well-being of our people, and advance the movement toward democracy of all the nations in our hemisphere. As we celebrate Mexico's valiant fight for independence, let us rededicate ourselves to the principles that inspired the Mexican patriots who fought at Puebla and strive together to forge a brighter future for all our citizens.

Best wishes to all for a wonderful celebration.

BILL CLINTON