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embolden our enemies and confirm their belief that America is weak. It could unleash chaos in Iraq that could spread across the entire region. It would be an invitation to the enemy to attack America and our friends around the world. And, ultimately, a precipitous withdrawal would increase the probability that American troops would one day have to return to Iraq and confront an enemy that's even more dangerous.

Second, the Democratic leadership's proposal is aimed at restricting the ability of our generals to direct the fight in Iraq. They've imposed legislative mandates—they passed legislative mandates telling them which enemies they can engage and which they cannot. That means our commanders in the middle of a combat zone would have to take fighting directions from legislators 6,000 miles away on Capitol Hill. The result would be a marked advantage for our enemies and a greater danger for our troops.

Third, the bill proposed by Democratic leaders would spend billions of dollars on projects completely unrelated to the war. Proposed legislation does remove some of the most egregious porkbarrel projects that Democratic leaders had inserted in earlier bills. Yet it still includes huge amounts of domestic spending that has no place in an emergency war funding bill. We should debate those provisions on their own merits, during the normal process, but funding for our troops should not be held hostage while that debate unfolds.

I know that Americans have serious concerns about this war. People want our troops to come home, and so do I. But no matter how frustrating the fight can be and no matter how much we wish the war was over, the security of our country depends directly on the outcome in Iraq. The price of giving up there would be paid in American lives for years to come. It would be an unforgivable mistake for leaders in Washington to allow politics and impatience to stand in the way of protecting the American people.

Last November, the American people said they were frustrated and wanted change in our strategy in Iraq. I listened. Today, General David Petraeus is carrying out a strategy that is dramatically different from our previous course. The American people did not vote for failure, and that is precisely what the Democratic leadership's bill would guarantee.

It's not too late for Congress to do the right thing and to send me a bill that gives our troops and their commanders the funds and flexibility they need. I'm willing to meet with leaders in Congress as many times as it takes to resolve our differences. Yet if the Democratic leaders insist on using the bill to make a political statement, they will leave me with only one option: I will veto it. And then I'll work with Congress to pass a clean bill that funds our troops without handcuffing our commanders, spending billions of dollars unrelated to the war, and forcing our Nation to withdraw on the enemy's terms.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:13 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq.

Remarks at the Harlem Village Academy Charter School in New York City

April 24, 2007

Thank you for the warm welcome. I appreciate you making a Texan feel right at home here in Harlem. [*Laughter*] I have had a remarkable experience here at Harlem Village Academy Charter School.

You know, it's interesting, one of the children said, "Why here? Why did you come here, Mr. President? Of all the schools in the country, why this school?" And my answer is, because the President has an opportunity to herald excellence, and I have seized that opportunity. I have come to a school where some may say, "These children can't possibly exceed high standards"—but, in fact, they are. Secondly, I wanted to be nice to the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

I think any time I can thank a teacher, I need to do so. So for the teachers here, thank you for teaching; for the principals—[*applause*].

Interestingly enough, this week is called National Charter School Week—I mean,

next week is called National Charter School Week, so a good way to herald National Charter School Week is, come to a charter school, particularly one that's working. I'm a big believer in charter schools. I think charter schools make a lot of sense, whether it be here in Harlem or anywhere else in the United States.

And so a way to express support for a charter school is to come to one that's working and say to people, if you find excellence, you might want to take a look at why; what is it about this school that enables a parent to say, I really enjoy sending my child here. Or what is it about this school, where a child looks at the President and says, I don't mind being tested, because I know that they're going to help correct problems early, before it's too late. This school is working, and I appreciate you letting me come to talk about not only this school but also about an important piece of legislation called the No Child Left Behind Act.

Before I do so, I thank Deborah for being what I call an educational entrepreneur. That means that—[*applause*]. So I said to Deborah—you know, I've never met Deborah before, and I said, how did you get involved in this school? She had a personal tragedy, and rather than allowing the personal tragedy to drag her down, she said, "I want to make a contribution. And I can't think of a better contribution than to help start a charter school"—as a matter of fact, not only one but two. I also thought it was interesting, she said, "If you're going to be somebody who helps start charter schools and works to make charter schools excellent, that you better be on the frontlines of education." So she became the principal of this school.

If you're interested in helping your community—whether you be an individual, such as a Deborah, or a corporation, for example—promote school excellence, do something for the community in which you live. A lot of times if you wait for government, things won't happen. She's proven my case. She says, "I want to be involved, and I want to start some schools." Corporate America needs to take the same interest in local schools if they expect there to be a—if we expect our country to realize its promise.

Mateo Myers introduces Dr. Kenny and introduces me—Mateo Myers. So I said to a lot of the kids here at this school, "How many of you want to go to college?" They all rose—raised their hand. That's a good sign. In other words, this school believes in high expectations and putting in a child's mind the possibilities of achieving a dream.

I appreciate very much Joel Klein. You talk about a guy who has taken on a tough job and, in my judgment, my humble judgment, is doing it with excellence, is Joel Klein. As a result of that endorsement, he may never find work again in New York, but nevertheless—[*laughter*].

See, I love it when somebody heralds that which is working and takes on that which is not working. I like a man who says, "The status quo is unacceptable," when it's unacceptable and is willing to do hard work, all aimed at making sure every child gets a good education. And we appreciate the standard you've set and appreciate the example you have shown, Joel.

I want thank Ed Lewis, chairman of Village Academies. Ed Lewis is a successful businessman who, instead of taking his successes and disappearing, has taken his successes and used that which enabled him to be successful to plow back into a community. And that's an example a lot of other people need to see.

People say to me all the time, "What can I do, Mr. President? How can I contribute?" Well, if you want to contribute, work on school excellence. I can't think of a better way to contribute to the future of the United States than to promote alternatives if the school systems in your community aren't—isn't working. In other words, just don't set the status quo if children are not meeting standards; challenge that status quo, and do something about it.

I appreciate very much Nick Timpone, who is the principal here at Harlem Village. [*Applause*] That's a good sign. Like, I'd be worried about the silence, you know. [*Laughter*] It turns out that good schools such as this have good principals, people who work hard, people who, you know, motivate the teaching staff, people who listen to parents. And I appreciate you very much being at the center of this important school.

Traveling with me today is the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings. I appreciate you coming, Madam Secretary. Her job is to work with local school districts so that the Federal, State, and local relationship is a collaborative relationship that actually works and doesn't get in each other's way. And her job is to implement No Child Left Behind. And I couldn't have picked anybody better to do so.

I want to thank, again, Charlie Rangel. He is the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. You can imagine what it's like traveling in the Presidential limousine down Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard hearing Rangel say, "I was raised over here, and here's the hotel I worked in when I was a boy." You know, the people in Harlem have got a fantastic Congressman in Charles Rangel. He cares deeply—[*applause*]. He can agree with me a few more times, but—[*laughter*]—I don't expect him to. But I do expect him to do what he does, which is work for the good of the country. And I'm really proud to be with you. Thanks for coming, Charlie.

Peter King, Congressman Peter King and Vito Fossella is with us today. Both of these Congressmen care about education. I appreciate the members of the New York charter school community who have taken time to come. I want to thank the Harlem community leaders who have joined us today. Thanks for letting me be here. I particularly want to thank the students for letting me come by to say hello. I've really enjoyed my trip here, and you've impressed me.

I do want to say something about Virginia Tech, the Virginia Tech community. It's a community that still hurts, and the people in Blacksburg, Virginia, must know that citizens, whether they be in Harlem or anywhere else in the country, still hold those folks in their prayers.

Schools should be places of safety; they should be a sanctuary of learning. And when that sanctuary is violated, the impact is felt all across the country. It's felt in every classroom. And I know you've worried about such violence here, as a result of the Virginia Tech. And I want to thank the principals and teachers for reacting and helping calm nerves and assure people that this is a place of safety and a sanctuary for learning.

I have asked people in my administration to travel around the country, to listen to folks at the State and local level to determine what lessons can be learned from the Virginia Tech horror. Margaret Spellings is going to be a part of this team, as is the Justice Department, Health and Human Services. We, of course, will provide whatever assistance we can to Virginia Tech, but we also want to be a part of a review of broader questions that have been raised.

And so they're going to travel the country. They're going to talk with mental health experts and educators and State and local officials, and come back and summarize what they have learned. And we'll share the summaries of what they've learned, all in the hopes of learning lessons from a horrible moment. It was—it's a tough time down there.

I want to talk about schools, and I want to talk about educational excellence for every single child. And I want to emphasize that in my remarks—my hopes of the public school systems in every State and every community excel. That's our goal. The public school systems have provided great opportunities for a lot of Americans. One of the great assets of the United States of America is a public school system that works.

I also believe that parental involvement is an important aspect of having a public school system that works, and I like the fact that charter schools encourage parental involvement. I like to be able to sit with parents and say, I have chose school for my child—chosen the school for my child—I could use a little extra help. [*Laughter*]

Isn't that an interesting concept? "I made the choice to send my child here." That has got a nice ring to it as far as I'm concerned. I appreciate the fact that the teachers involve the parents in the child's education. There's a lot of information flows that take place between the parent and the child, and the child and the teacher. I appreciate the fact that teachers give parents their cell phone numbers. I think that's an important way to make sure parents are involved in the education of their children.

I appreciate the fact that folks here set high standards. I know this isn't all that profound, but when you set low standards, you get bad results. I used to call it the soft bigotry of low expectations. You kind of say, well, certain people can't learn; therefore, let's make sure the standards are low. This school challenges that soft bigotry and insists upon high standards. And guess what? That's what parents want. Parents want their children challenged. Parents believe that high standards are good for their children.

I appreciate the fact that people go to school here from 7:30 a.m. until 5:45 p.m. That's innovation. That means somebody here is saying, "I'm going to adjust the time the children go to school so that we can achieve high standards." I like the idea of schools having flexibility to meet the needs of their parents and their children. Maybe some schools around the country couldn't have that kind of innovation because the rules and the process say, well, you can't adjust that way. What I like are schools that focus on results, and then adjust the process to meet the results.

I appreciate the fact that parents choose this school because it's safe. That's what parents want—they want safety for their children. I met with Vanessa Freeman. Her daughter, Krystal, goes to this school. She was struggling at her old school. The teacher said she was acting up in class in the old school. In other words, the parent, Vanessa, recognized there was a problem and—my mother probably got a few of those calls too—[*laughter*]—but, anyway, Vanessa transferred Krystal here to the Harlem Village Academy. She's learning algebra. She said her math teacher—her math teacher says her progress has given her goose bumps.

In other words, something has changed here at this school. In other words, there is progress being made because the parent had an option to choose something different when the other school wasn't working. It's a powerful catalyst for reform, by the way, to give people those options. That's why I'm a strong supporter of the charter school movement—I appreciate providing different options.

I want you to know that it is a national objective, an important national goal to make sure every child realizes his or her full potential. And that is the whole philosophy behind the No Child Left Behind Act. You know, when we put our mind to it, actually, Republicans and Democrats can work together; we did so to get this important piece of legislation passed.

The philosophy behind the bill is this: When the Federal Government spends money, we should expect results. And by the way, when the State spends money, it ought to expect results too. Instead of just spending money and hoping for the best, the core philosophy of the No Child Left Behind says, we'll spend money, and we expect you to measure, and we expect you to post your scores, and we expect you to meet standards, because if you don't, you're failing in your obligation to educate every child.

Now, if you believe certain children can't learn, then you shouldn't measure. In other words, if you think that, well, it's just a hopeless exercise, let's just move kids through the school system, then that makes sense not to measure—why would you—why waste the time? I believe every child can learn, and therefore, I believe every school should measure in return for Federal money, and then put the scores up early.

I'll tell you why. I want the parents to be involved with education. And one way you're involved with education is, you're able to compare the test scores of your school to your neighborhood school. It's an interesting way to determine whether or not high standards are being met. In some cases, a parent will say, "This is the greatest school possible," and yet when the test scores get posted, the reality comes home.

Secondly, I don't see how you can solve problems unless you measure problems. How do you know whether a child needs extra help in reading unless you measure? In other words, the accountability system is step one of a diagnostic process that ends up making sure that each child gets the help that's needed to meet standards, high standards. And so the No Child Left Behind Act—a simple way of describing it says, if you set high standards, we'll give you money, but we expect you to meet those standards, and if not, there ought to be different options for the parents.

I appreciate the results of this school. In other words, it's interesting, isn't it, that the President can come and say, you've got good results here—because you measure. Teachers use the assessment to see what concepts students are mastering and which concepts ought to be continued and which concepts ought to be dropped. The data from this school that you—as a result of measurement, helps teachers tailor their lesson plans to the specific needs of the child. Isn't that interesting—the education system tailoring the needs to fit the—tailor the curriculum to fit the needs of the child. That may sound simple, but it's an unusual concept for a lot of schools.

The school has a rapid response accountability system. In other words, you don't measure once and just kind of hope for the best for the remainder of the year; you track student progress closely from week to week. When student struggle, they receive one-on-one tutoring during the school day; if a child struggles, there is extra help on a Saturday, hence, No Child Left Behind. As opposed to the old system, where you just shuffled children through and hope for the best at the end, this school measures on a regular basis to make sure that we're dealing not with guesswork, but with results.

I appreciate the fact that this school opened in the fall of 2003. I want you to hear this statistic: During the first year, less than 20 percent of the fifth graders could meet State standards in math, only 20 percent—[*applause*]—wait a minute; that's nothing to applaud for. [*Laughter*] That's, like, pitiful. Last year, 96 percent of the students from the same class were meeting State standards.

One of the students was Kevin Smith. His mother says that when Kevin came to the Harlem Village Academy in 2003, he struggled. And now she says, "He can do it with his eyes closed." That's a math student right there. [*Laughter*] Deborah Kenny says, "Our school proves that children can achieve grade level, even when they start behind." And that's the spirit.

We can see that No Child Left Behind is working nationwide. There's an achievement gap in America that better be closed if we want America to remain the leader of the world. It is unacceptable to me and it should be unacceptable to people across the country, we have an achievement gap in America.

It's amazing what happens, though, when you measure. The percentage of New York City fourth graders meeting State standards in reading has increased by more than 12 percent over 5 years. The percentage of fourth graders doing math at grade level has increased by 19 points. Congratulations, Joel, for holding people to account. I know, people say, "I don't like to test; you're testing too much." I don't see how you can solve problems unless you diagnose the problems. I don't see how you can met—high standards unless you test.

I appreciate the fact that nationwide, 9-year-olds have made more progress in 5 years than in the previous 28 years combined on these tests in reading. How about that? In other words, we're beginning to make progress early. The pipeline is beginning to be full of little readers that are competent readers. And the fundamental question is, what do we do in junior high and high school? Do we keep the progress going, or do we fall off when it comes to holding people to account?

I believe strongly that we ought to bring the same standards to high school that we've had in elementary—one through eight, or three through eight. That's what I believe. I believe if you want to make sure a high school diploma means something, you better have high accountability in high schools. We want the high school diploma to say, this person is ready to compete in a world in which the graduates are going to be competing with Chinese or Indian workers. In other words, it matters what happens now in our schools more so than ever before.

And so part of the initiative to make sure that we continue to set high standards is to bring these standards to high school. I believe strongly that we ought to—the Federal Government has a role in expanding Advanced Placement courses all across the United States of America. I'm a big believer in AP. I think AP holds people to account and challenges people to realize their full potential.

We've got an effort right now to encourage 30,000 math and science professionals to become part-time teachers. Why would you encourage math and science professionals? Because if you've got the capability of competing globally in math and science, you're going to be getting a good job, is why. It's a practical application of U.S. resources to encourage 30,000 math and science professionals to enter classrooms to encourage people to be interested in math and science.

You know, I met a math teacher here. The man went to Harvard—now, we're not going to hold that against him, but nevertheless—[*laughter*]—he's out there somewhere. [*Laughter*] He's teaching math. He'd been doing a lot of things, and he's teaching math right here at this important charter school, because he understands the importance of teaching a child math, in terms of that child being able to find good work and be a productive citizen in this challenging 21st century.

Here are some ways we can improve the No Child Left Behind Act. My funding request has money for underperforming schools, when you recognize there's failure and these schools need help. I'm a strong believer in making sure that money follows children. And so when we find a child failing in meeting high standards, there ought to be extra tutorial money for that child. In other words, the measurement system not only helps determine who's falling behind, but it helps determine whether or not that child ought to get extra money now, early, before it's too late. That's been an integral part of No Child Left Behind. It's going to be a significant part of No Child Left Behind as we go forward.

I believe strongly that we've got to make sure that we—if a school just won't change and continues to fail, that principals ought to be given additional staffing freedom. In other words, there ought to be flexibility—more flexibility as opposed to less flexibility when a school fails.

I think we ought to empower mayors and other elected officials to take a more active hand in improving their schools. If you find failure, it's important to do something differently. And one way to do so is to encourage more power in the hands of our mayors to break through bureaucratic logjams that are preventing people from achieving educational excellence.

And we ought to make it easier for officials to reorganize failing schools into charter schools. We just cannot allow the status quo to exist when we find failure.

Another way we can help is to encourage our Nation's best teachers to take jobs in some of the toughest neighborhoods. And so we proposed increasing the investment in the Teacher Incentive Fund to nearly $200 million next year. In other words, there's a way for the Federal Government to encourage teachers to take on jobs that are important jobs and making sure that every child gets a good education with a good teacher. The fund rewards teachers who defy low expectations. It provides incentives for people to come into districts all around the United States to challenge the softy bigotry that I was talking about.

Third, parents of students in underperforming schools must have better choices. You find your child stuck in a school that won't teach and won't change, you ought to have a different option. I can't think of a better way to get somebody's attention that we're tired of mediocrity than to give a parent an option. I think there's a better—no better way to send a signal that folks are tired of mediocrity when it comes to our classrooms than say to a parent, you should have a different opportunity for your child, whether it be a charter school or a better performing public school.

In Washington, DC, we did an interesting—made an interesting initiative, and that is, is that we provided scholarship money for poor students to go to any school they wanted. I like that idea. I think it makes a lot of sense. You know, we have Pell grants for poor students to go to college. I think we ought to have Federal taxpayers' money to go to poor parents so they can choose a different type of school if they're dissatisfied with the school their child is going to. And so I would strongly urge Congress to reauthorize and refund the D.C. School Choice Program and take a good look at our program that intends to expand that program.

I do want to congratulate Governor Spitzer and Mayor Bloomberg for working with the

Chancellor here to increase the number of charter schools here in New York. I appreciate the fact that they're taking a bold initiative. As I understand, they want to double the number of charter schools available for the students here in New York, and that's a good thing. You know, Margaret is going to help you, to the extent that she can.

So now we're in the process of rewriting this bill—reauthorizing it. Here's my attitude about this: One, Congress shouldn't weaken the bill. It's working. The No Child Left Behind Act is working. These test scores are on the rise. Accountability makes a significant difference in educational excellence.

And so therefore, when Republicans and Democrats take a look at this bill, I strongly urge them to not weaken the bill, not to backslide, not to say, accountability isn't that important. It is important. We'll work with the school districts on flexibility when it comes to the accountability system. And I mean that there are certain ways that we can make this—the accountability system actually work better than it's worked in the past.

But we will not allow this good piece of legislation to be weakened. And if you're a parent, you should insist that the No Child Left Behind Act remain a strong accountability tool so that every child in this country gets a good education. I'll reach out to both Republicans and Democrats again. Last time I signed the bill, I was on the stage with one of Charlie's good friends and colleagues, Congressman George Miller from California, Ted Kennedy, and two Republican colleagues of theirs. And it was—we worked well together.

And so my pledge is that I will continue to reach out and work with the new leadership of the Congress, all aimed at making sure this piece of legislation goes forward and making sure it's funded, so that we can say, once again, we've got law in place that will enable us to give every child as good an education as possible so that not one child, not one, is left behind in our country.

It's such an honor to be here. I love coming to a place where people defy expectations. I love coming to a place where you said, we're going to try to do something in a different way, that the status quo is not acceptable, so here we go. I love being with educational entrepreneurs, good principals, strong teachers, caring parents, and students who are going to be leading this Nation in the 21st century.

God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Deborah Kenny, founder and chief executive officer, Village Academies; Mateo Myers, student, and Justin Fong, math teacher and department chair, Harlem Village Academy Charter School; Joel I. Klein, chancellor, New York City Department of Education; Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York City; and Gov. Eliot Spitzer of New York. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on the Interagency Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes

April 24, 2007

The brave men and women who have volunteered to protect and defend our country deserve to receive the highest level of support from our grateful Nation. Today Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson and members of the Interagency Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes released a government-wide action plan that sets out steps to improve our care for America's troops and veterans.

The task force has proposed specific recommendations to immediately begin addressing the problems and gaps in services that were identified across the veterans and military healthcare systems. These recommendations include directing the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop a joint process for disability determination. Additionally, I have asked Secretary Nicholson to communicate directly with the members of the Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors to ensure that both groups exchange ideas and information that will efficiently advance reform efforts.

I commend the work of the task force, welcome its recommendations, and have directed Secretary Nicholson to work with all agencies involved on the recommendations