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Speeches

Bill Richardson for President

Making America's Schools Work

10/11/2007

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Thank you so much for being here today.

As we stand here today, our schools have again been stricken by tragedy. Our prayers go out to the students and parents of Cleveland, Ohio. Each senseless act of violence lessens us all. Every American loses a piece of his or her heart. Every American must again grieve. Every American feels a little less safe.

We must do everything possible to ensure that schools become safe havens.

I will and we must insist that national attention is given to preparedness for school safety at the K-12 level and in higher education as well. I will require all schools to develop safety protocols and policies to be used in an emergency.

And I renew my call for national instant background checks on all gun sales, including at gun shows. We must keep guns out of the hands of the irresponsible -- criminals and the mentally ill.

I want to talk to you about how we can fix our education system ... because the fact is, it's broken. It's broken from top to bottom.

Too many kids lack access to pre-K ... not enough graduate high school.

Too many of our young people are unprepared for college ... not enough can afford to go.

Too many of our workers are falling behind the rest of the world ... not enough are getting the training they need to compete.

There have been too many promises ... and not enough leadership.

George Bush promised to be the education President. You know how far that promise got? About as far as his promise on inauguration day to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution. About as far as his promise to take real action on global warming. About as far as his promise to be fiscally responsible.

Far from leaving no child behind, the Bush Administration seems to have left reality behind.

The President talks about an ownership society, then cuts funding for workforce training.

He talks about freedom, but his actions have left young college graduates shackled by debt.

The President talks about an America we can all believe in; then he delivers policies that benefit only a few.

Enough is enough.

The past seven years have been a dark period in our nation's history.

It's time we turn on the lights.

Education is the spark that lights minds. As we ignite schools across the country, we can kindle a great fire of learning that will light the way to the future.

We must begin with educating our young people, but we cannot stop there. Learning should not end at eighteen. And every American must have a part in the basic promise of our nation -- that we can make every tomorrow

better than today.

That starts with building the best public school system in the world. Compromises will not do. We must skip the caution. Skip the half measures. What we need is bold change.

My Democratic opponents have been cautious in confronting George Bush on this issue. Just as they trusted George Bush on the Iraq war and the Patriot Act, they trusted him on No Child Left Behind. The result has been a travesty for our children.

Some say fix it, others say tweak it. Senator Hillary Clinton says reform it.

I also have two words for No Child Left Behind: Scrap It.

As a Governor I have seen first-hand the impact of this failed policy on our children. And although Senator Clinton and some of my other opponents voted for it, they should admit their error, and join my call for real change.

The key to a good education is not narrow tests or Washington wisdom. The key is a good teacher in every classroom.

We need to attract and retain the best and brightest for our nation's schools. We need to start treating teachers with the professional respect that they have earned.

When I am President, teachers will have a national average starting salary of \$40,000. We will improve and expand teacher training ... and strengthen standards and accountability. We will increase the number of nationally-certified teachers.

I will provide bonuses and create a loan forgiveness program for teachers who choose to work in under-performing and high-poverty areas.

I also commit to you that I will hire 100,000 new math and science teachers. It's a simple equation -- talented math and science **teachers** lead to inspired and successful math and science **students**. High-quality math and science education is not optional. It is essential to holding our position as the world's leader of progress and hope. And I will set a national goal of making America number one in the world in math and science within fifteen years.

I will convene a national summit on Educational Standards and Accountability. We need to develop national Gold Standards that the states can adopt.

We should move from a pass/fail model to a more comprehensive system of measurement. Narrow tests will only create narrow people.

In general, we need to end the policy of punishment that Bush gave us with No Child Left Behind. **If a school fails, we shouldn't punish that school, we should help it.**

I also promise that I will strongly and steadfastly oppose school vouchers.

Outsourcing our public education is simply wrong. The solution to the problems with our public schools is **not** just giving up on them.

We must reject vouchers, which divert needed resources from our public schools. But we must also encourage choice by supporting charter schools. In New Mexico, this philosophy has made my state second in the nation for school choice.

Charter schools work. Vouchers do not.

We should not try to shrink our public school system ... we should be working to expand it. As President, I will provide universal access to quality pre-K programs to all four-year-olds.

And I will fully fund Head Start.

Just as an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of the cure ... a year of early education is worth several years of remedial education.

The benefits of early education are clear and extensive. The evidence shows that those who participate in pre-k end up with better earnings, better employment, and better savings later in life ... as well as fewer arrests, fewer out-of-wedlock births, and less drug use.

We need to get our kids into school earlier and we need to ensure that they make it all the way through.

Overall, our high school graduation rate is only seventy percent -- each year one million students drop out of high school. Minority students are even worse off -- only 56 percent of African Americans and 52 percent of Latinos

graduate. It is just not right.

I will provide a billion dollars per year to help states expand their dropout prevention programs. This is a small price to pay. It is estimated that each class of high school dropouts costs our nation 200 billion dollars in lost wages and tax revenue.

Furthermore I will devote particular attention to minority students, who are most at risk of dropping out.

These are the basics, and we all know that we need to get back to basics. But we've also got to raise the bar. We have to take bold steps toward a comprehensive vision of learning and education.

I will create 250 Math, Science, and Innovation Academies. These Academies will offer rigorous math and science instruction, free of charge, to seventh-through-twelfth graders who want it. They will train the next wave of American engineers, mathematicians, scientists, and teachers.

And I will put the arts back into our schools.

Students who engage in the arts are more likely to get involved in community and charity work. These students do better academically.

Arts education is not a silver bullet, but it is a lighted bridge. It's long past time the President ordered a comprehensive analysis of the quality and extent of arts education in our schools. I will do that.

I will provide 250 million dollars for the NEA's Arts in Education programs.

We will pay for musical instruments and music teachers in underserved communities throughout the country. And we will make art and music therapy available for children with emotional and developmental challenges.

I will fiercely support state and local efforts to stress arts education in their curricula. The federal government will offer extra matching funds to states that draw up their own, comprehensive art programs.

In addition to reconsidering **what** our students learn, we have to reconsider **how** they learn. We need to redesign America's high schools for the twenty-first century.

We should use the best technology to create more flexible learning environments. We need to increase opportunities for Advanced Placement and online courses. We need to increase access to higher education by supporting dual enrollment. And we should align high school exit and college entrance criteria. We did this in New Mexico and it works.

Furthermore, we need to increase the rigor and relevance of high school classes. Too many students drop out because they just don't see the point of staying in.

And we have to create smaller learning communities -- not only smaller class sizes, but also smaller schools. And we should encourage smaller groups within schools, like freshman academies.

In addition, we need to promote the welfare of our nation's children. An essential part of educating better citizens...is ensuring that they are safe and healthy.

As President, I will work with the states to adopt healthier nutrition policies for schools. I will increase participation in school breakfast programs. I will bring back physical education. We did it in New Mexico -- we took junk food out of the schools and put Phys-Ed back in. And I supported funding for healthy school breakfasts.

We also doubled the number of school-based health clinics. As President, I will provide incentives to open these clinics across the country.

Finally, we have to get parents -- all parents -- more involved in the education of our nation's students. Teachers cannot do it alone, no matter how good they are. Parental involvement is more important to a child's success than any test or book.

As President, I will issue an executive order that provides all federal employees with eight hours per year of paid, one-to-one time with their children. And I will encourage businesses and the rest of the public sector to do the same. The Republicans can talk all they want about family values -- I will do something that actually promotes them.

I will also help states with the type of parental outreach that has worked in my state. In New Mexico, we created a parent involvement toolkit that provides easy and practical strategies for teachers and principals. We also developed parent-to-parent DVD's to educate parents on how they can help their children succeed in school.

I know that the strategies I've outlined will work ... because they have worked in New Mexico. When I first took

office, my state ranked 46th in the nation for teacher pay. Now, we have jumped to 29th.

We improved salaries and accountability by increasing compensation in conjunction with increased performance. We've provided incentives for teachers to become national board-certified. Today, an average of 94 percent of our teachers are rated Highly Qualified -- a major increase since 2005.

We moved money from administration to teaching and we invested an additional 600 million dollars in our classrooms. We also put in place a full-day kindergarten program and initiated statewide pre-K for every four-year-old in New Mexico. I am proud that our school reform initiative was ranked second in the nation by the Fordham Foundation.

But we didn't stop with primary education. We took the bold, necessary steps to increase access to higher education. I signed legislation expanding the merit-based New Mexico Lottery Scholarship Fund. We created a need-based College Affordability Fund and endowed it with a hundred million dollars. I also enacted a tax credit for college tuition and fees.

We improved access to higher education because it was right for our students, and it was right for our state.

In the twenty-first century, college cannot be the province of the wealthy and the elite. In our increasingly competitive world, higher education is often an absolute requirement for a decent job.

But these days, too many of our young people are unprepared for college. And too many of those that are prepared ... cannot afford to go. Only 57 percent of those who graduate high school enroll directly in college the following year.

The Bush Administration has presided over soaring college costs. Between 2001 and 2010, two million high school graduates will have been priced out of a college education. And those that **do** go get to go ... will graduate with extraordinary debts. It is unacceptable.

As a nation, we cannot abide the status quo, and we cannot afford fewer college graduates. The cost is simply too high.

Whenever President Bush cuts access to college, he cuts back hope, and he cuts down progress.

We must do better.

As President, I will make college affordable and accessible to every high school graduate who wants to attend.

I will offer meaningful incentives for schools to keep tuition costs under control, including additional grants and loans.

And we need to simplify the college aid process. The form that families have to fill out to get college aid, the FAFSA, is 127 questions. That's longer than the form to get US citizenship. Something's wrong when it's more complicated to get money for school than it is to become an American citizen.

I will tear up the FAFSA and replace it with a postcard-sized form. This will expand access to a consolidated, National Endowment for College Affordability.

President Bush **has** increased student loan funding -- to private banks. I will eliminate his 15 million dollar a day subsidy to banks and private lenders ... and redirect that money to students who need it.

And I will increase aid to students who need it the most. I will expand programs like LEAP and GEAR UP that help students from low-income families.

Finally, I will call on Americans to serve their country and the world.

After 9/11, Americans stood ready to serve. But President Bush asked most of us to sit back and sulk.

We need real leadership NOW.

The vital spirit of service that fought the Nazis in the forties and sustained the Peace Corps in the sixties ... is alive in America today.

As President, I will create a national service program that pays two years of college for one year of service. We need more college graduates. And we need more men and women who are willing to serve their fellow citizens.

So let us once again measure our national greatness not by the hardness of our walls or the easy accumulation of material things ... but by the cultivation of learning, the quality of our national character, and the frank determination to make tomorrow better than today -- for all mankind.

This is the solemn promise of our nation -- that all Americans can make life better for themselves and their families and their fellow Americans. I believe that there should be second acts in American lives ... and third acts, and fourth acts, and fifth acts. And if we are to uphold this solemn promise, then our commitment to education cannot end with high school ... it cannot end with college ... it cannot end, **period.**

We have to make sure that our workers get the training they need. We have to make sure that Americans remain competitive in a rapidly changing world.

President Bush doesn't seem to understand. Since 2002, total funding for the Employment and Training Administration has declined by 25 percent.

In New Mexico, we've worked diligently to improve workforce development programs, in combination with a tax structure that encourages job growth. The results speak for themselves. 80,000 more jobs -- good jobs. And an unemployment rate of about 3.7 percent, near the lowest in New Mexico's history.

I know how to create and maintain quality jobs, and I know we can do it across the country.

While workforce development cannot be dictated by the bureaucracy in Washington, the President must lead on this issue.

In the face of globalization and lost jobs, the government must help working Americans in transition. We also have to give underserved Americans the opportunity to learn the skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

I will create a new grant program for community colleges of 400 million dollars per year. Community colleges must play a central role in American life. These satellites of higher learning project the power of education into communities across the country, educating the workforce of thousands of businesses. It is essential that we fully support and fund them.

Let me tell you why I care deeply about education and why my plan is so much bolder than what my colleagues are offering.

I know first-hand how a teacher can make a difference in a kid's life. When I came back to America at the age of thirteen, the other students were ahead of me. If I had been left on my own, I might have fallen through the cracks -- as so many students do today.

It was a teacher who made the difference. Every young American needs a teacher who can make a difference in their lives. That's what my plan is about.

The vision I have outlined is bold and comprehensive. It is also expensive. Unlike the timid plans of others, mine is a 60 billion dollar investment in our nation's future.

To those who ask how we can afford it, let me be specific. I will cut billions of dollars in loan subsidies to private banks and lenders. Furthermore, last week, I outlined a detailed plan for defense modernization that saves 57 billion dollars by cutting Pentagon waste and outdated, unnecessary weapons systems, many of which were designed for the Cold War.

These are detailed, responsible cuts -- some of them to nuclear programs in my own state of New Mexico. This money must be reinvested in our nation's students and schools.

I issue a challenge to every one of my opponents: be bold and be specific. Follow my lead and tell the country how you will make America's education system the greatest in the world.

We can be the best again. In fact, we must be. It will require the efforts of every American, but together, I know we can do it.

Thank you.



