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Remarks at an America's Promise Alliance Education Event

March 1, 2010

Thank you. Everybody please have a seat. Let me begin by acknowledging some of the extraordinary people who are working on this extraordinary project. First of all, I want everybody to know, in case you haven't already met him, somebody who is working tirelessly on behalf of the young people of America, my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

I want to acknowledge Marguerite Kondracke, the CEO of America's Promise, who is going to be implementing so much of the terrific work that's been discussed today. Marguerite—there she is, right there.

I want to thank Tom Donohue for your hospitality in this extraordinary venue; thank you very much, and thanks for the Chamber's support for this terrific effort. I want to acknowledge Margaret Spellings, Arne's predecessor, who helped to lead a lot of the improvement that's been taking place and we're building on.

And obviously, I want to thank the Powells, and I will start with the more important Powell, Alma. [*Laughter*] I want to say a word about the remarkable woman who introduced me, a champion of children, a dedicated public servant, and the recipient of numerous awards. And Alma has poured herself into America's Promise Alliance, helping make it the largest partnership of its kind to improve education and help children in this country.

And perhaps that's not surprising, because being an educator seems to run in the family, as I understand. Even though one of her mother's parents was born into slavery and the other just after abolition, both went to college, became teachers, four of their children followed them into the education profession. So her family has educated and enriched generations of Americans, and our Nation is better off for it. And so we are very grateful to you for your extraordinary leadership. Thank you.

There's not much more we can say about the man that Alma succeeds as chair of the Alliance that most people don't already know anyway. I will say that I'm grateful for his friendship, for his counsel, and like so many Americans, I continue to be inspired by his leadership and by his life's story.

It's a story of a son of Jamaican garment workers, a student from the South Bronx, like me, wasn't always at his best in high school, but who went on to City College of New York, thanks to the support of his family and his friends and his community. It's a story of a ROTC cadet who went on to distinguish himself first in Vietnam, then in the Pentagon, in the White House, and in the State Department, and who, after spending a lifetime fighting on behalf of America, has now taken up the fight for America's children.

So the leadership of Colin and Alma are—that they are showing by spearheading the Grad Nation campaign to end America's dropout crisis is just the latest chapter in their service to this Nation. And so I want to publicly commend them and thank them for their extraordinary service. Thank you very much.

One last person I want to make mention of, because I think it bears on the extraordinary public-private partnership that's taking place here, we have the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, Patrick Corvington, who is here. Where's Patrick? There he

is back there. And so we are hoping to make sure we get a whole bunch of volunteers engaged in this effort.

Now, it's fitting that we're talking about education here at the Chamber of Commerce. After all, for America to compete and to win in the 21st century, we know that we will need a highly educated workforce that is second to none. And we know that the success of every American will be tied more closely than ever before to the level of education that they achieve. The jobs will go to the people with the knowledge and the skills to do them. It's that simple. In this kind of knowledge economy, giving up on your education and dropping out of school means not only giving up on your future, but it's also giving up on your family's future and giving up on your country's future.

And yet, that's what too many of America's children are doing today. Over 1 million students don't finish high school each year, nearly one in three. Over half are African American and Latino. The graduation gap in some places between white students and classmates of color is 40 or 50 percent. And in cities like Detroit and Indianapolis and Baltimore, graduation rates hover around 30, 40 percent, roughly half the national average.

Now, it's true that not long ago, you could drop out of high school and reasonably expect to find a blue-collar job that would pay the bills and help support your family. That's just not the case anymore. In recent years, a high school dropout has made, on average, about $10,000 less per year than a high school graduate. In fact, during this recession, a high school dropout has been more than three times as likely to be out of work as someone with at least a college degree.

Graduating from high school is an economic imperative. That might be the best reason to get a diploma, but it's not the only reason to get a high school diploma. As Alma mentioned, high school dropouts are more likely to be teen parents, more likely to commit crime, more likely to rely on public assistance, more likely to lead shattered lives. What's more, they cost our economy hundreds of billions of dollars over the course of a lifetime in lower wages and higher public expenses.

So this is a problem we cannot afford to accept and we cannot afford to ignore. The stakes are too high, for our children, for our economy, and for our country. It's time for all of us to come together, parents, students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials from across the political spectrum, to end America's dropout crisis.

This is a problem that I've actually been fighting for years. Way back when, when I was a community organizer in Chicago, I saw what happened to a family or to a school or to a community when a student dropped out. So I helped work with local churches in the region to—and public school officials to get State funding for dropout prevention programs and brought together African American and Latino leaders to help set up after-school programs, because when we help keep kids off the street, when we give them a productive way to spend their time, then graduation rates go up.

So that's a commitment that I've carried with me to the Oval Office. And today I want to announce steps my administration will take to help end the dropout crisis in the African American community, in the Latino community, and in the larger American community. Because we know that about 12 percent of America's schools produce 50 percent of America's dropouts, we're going to focus on helping States and school districts turn around their 5,000 lowest performing schools in the next 5 years, and Arne will be amplifying and providing details on how we can do this.

We'll not only challenge States to identify high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent, we're going to invest another $900 million in strategies to get those graduation rates up. Strategies like transforming schools from top to bottom, by bringing in a new principal and training teachers to use more effective techniques in the classroom. Strategies like closing a school for a time and reopening it under new management or even shutting it down entirely and sending its students to a better school. And strategies like replacing a school's principal and at least half of its staff.

Now, replacing school staff should only be done as a last resort. The public servants who work in America's schools, whether they're principals or teachers or counselors or coaches, work long and hard on behalf of our children, and they deserve our gratitude. Keep in mind, I've got a sister who's a teacher; my mother spent time teaching. It's one of the most important jobs that we have in this country. We've got an obligation as a country to give them the support they need, because when principals and teachers succeed, then our children succeed.

So if a school is struggling, we have to work with the principal and the teachers to find a solution. We've got to give them a chance to make meaningful improvements. But if a school continues to fail its students year after year after year, if it doesn't show signs of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability.

And that's what happened in Rhode Island last week at a chronically troubled school, when just 7 percent of 11th graders passed State math tests—7 percent. When a school board wasn't able to deliver change by other means, they voted to lay off the faculty and the staff. As my Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, says, our kids get only one chance at an education, and we need to get it right.

Of course, getting it right requires more than just transforming our lowest performing schools. It requires giving students who are behind in school a chance to catch up and a path to a diploma. It requires focusing on students, from middle school through high school, who face factors at home, in the neighborhood, or in school that put them at risk of dropping out. And it requires replicating innovative ideas that make class feel engaging and relevant, because most high school dropouts in a recent study said the reason they dropped out was that they weren't interested in class and they weren't motivated to do their work.

So that's why we'll build on the efforts of places like Communities In Schools that make sure kids who are at risk of dropping out have one-on-one support. That's why we'll follow the example of places like the Met Center in Rhode Island that give students that individual attention, while also preparing them through real-world, hands-on training—the possibility of succeeding in a career.

And that's why we'll invest in accelerated instruction in reading and math to help students who've fallen behind make up credits and ultimately graduate on time. It's also why we'll foster better alternative high schools and transfer schools, where students who have dropped out and who are at risk of dropping out can return to the classroom and earn their diploma.

That's how we can curb dropout rates and boost graduating rates. I have to point out, in the 21st century, high schools shouldn't just make sure students graduate; they should make sure students graduate ready for college, ready for a career, and ready for life. And that's why we'll foster what are called early college high schools that allow students to earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree or college credit at the same time. We want to learn from successful charter schools, where students can take advanced and college-level courses.

So government has a responsibility. Government can help educate students to succeed in college and a career. Government can help provide the resources to engage dropouts and those at risk of dropping out. And when necessary, government has to be critically involved in turning around lowest performing schools. And nobody has been more passionate about this than Arne Duncan.

But as I've said before, education is not and cannot be the task of government alone. It's going to take nonprofits and businesses doing their part through alliances like America's Promise. It will take parents getting involved in their children's education, consistently, going to parent-teachers' conferences, helping their children with their homework. I have to point out I just went to my daughter's parent-teachers' conference last week. She's doing very well, by the way. [*Laughter*] It will take students as well, showing up to school on time and paying attention to classes and staying out of trouble. They're not let off the hook. Education isn't a passive activity; it's an active one.

So educating America's sons and daughters is a task for all Americans. And that's what this alliance, that's what this effort is all about, making sure that none of us think that it's somebody else's job, but rather we all accept our role to play in making sure that we have the best educated citizenry in the world. That's what has made the 20th century the American century; that's what will make the 21st century the American century.

Now, there's an old story that Colin has told about a man named George Ellis, who lived about a hundred years ago. And George Ellis was a janitor. His job was to clean up after the artist Daniel Chester French. Some of you may have heard of French; he's the one who carved the figure of Abraham Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial.

So day after day, week after week, month after month, Ellis went about his job, barely uttering a word to Mr. French, other than saying the occasional hello or goodbye. And then one day, just when French had nearly completed his masterpiece, Ellis spoke up. He said, "Mr. French, I have a question for you." So the artist said, "What is it?" "Well, what I want to ask is, how you knew all along that Mr. Lincoln was sitting inside that block of marble?"

And as Colin pointed out, that wasn't a silly question. Because sometimes in this country and in our lives, we see blocks of marble, and some people can see what's inside and some people can't. It was a question profound—it was a profound question about how we recognize the potential within each of us and chisel away at what's keeping it locked inside.

I'm absolutely confident that because of the work of Colin and Alma Powell, because of the work that Grad Nation campaign is going to be doing and America's Promise Alliance is going to be doing, because of the work that we're doing across this Nation to give our children the best education the world has to offer, from cradle to classroom, from college through career, that we are chiseling away at the obstacles that lie in our path, that block our children's potential. We want to unlock that potential, carve it out so that our economy succeeds, so that this country succeeds, and so that our children and grandchildren succeed.

So thank you very much for the extraordinary work you're doing. Thank you all for your participation. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:18 a.m. at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas J. Donohue, president and chief executive officer, U.S. Chamber of Commerce; former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings; Alma J. Powell, chair, America's Promise Alliance, and her husband former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell.

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