

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at McGavock High School in Nashville, Tennessee

January 30, 2014

The President. Hello, Raiders. Thank you. Hello, everybody. Hey! Well, it is good to be in Nashville! And it's good to be here at Big Mac.

I want to thank Reverend Sinkfield for your words of prayer. I want to thank Ronald for the great introduction. We are very proud of him. He's going somewhere. And he looks very sharp in that bow tie. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank the mayor of Nashville, Karl Dean, for having us here today. Mr. Mayor. You've got two outstanding Members of Congress who are here, Steve Cohen and Jim Cooper. And I want to acknowledge one of the finest public servants that we've ever had and a native of—proud native of Tennessee, Mr. Al Gore is here as well.

To the superintendent and your outstanding principal and all the teachers and, most importantly, the students, as well as all the parents who are doing an outstanding job, I just want to say thank you.

I wanted to come here today because I've heard great things about this high school and all of you. But I also recognize, the past couple days have been hard and have tested people's spirits. Some of you lost a good friend. So I wanted you to know that Michelle and I have been praying for all of you and the community. And I know that all of us are sending prayers to those families that have been so directly impacted. It's been heartbreaking.

I'd been planning to come to this school for a while because you've made great strides. You've made great strides, and the reason you've made great strides is because you've worked hard together. And by the way, those of you who have seats, feel free to sit down. [*Laughter*] Those of you who don't, don't. [*Laughter*]

You've been there for each other. In the weeks and months ahead, I hope you keep being there for each other, help each other through challenges and difficulties. This community cares about you. This country cares about you. And we want to celebrate what you've achieved, because the message I want to send here today is, we want every child to have every chance in life, every chance at happiness, every chance at success.

On Tuesday, I delivered my State of the Union Address. And—[*applause*]. Now, what I was going to say right at the top was, "The state of the Union is cold." [*Laughter*] But what I instead focused on is a very simple but profound idea, the idea of opportunity. It's at the heart of who we are as Americans. It means that no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, if you work hard, if you live up to your responsibilities, you can make it in America.

And that's the chance that this country gave me. I'm not very different than a lot of the students who are here, except probably, I was more irresponsible. [*Laughter*] I was raised by a single mom, with the help of my grandmother and my grandfather. We didn't have a lot of money, and sometimes, my mom was struggling because she was raising two kids and also trying to go to school herself.

We lived overseas for a time, but my mother emphasized even then, even when I was 6, 7, 8 years old, that your ticket is an education. And because I was living overseas, she was worried

that I'd fall behind. So she used to wake me up before sunrise to do my correspondence courses, to make sure I was keeping up with my American schooling, before I went to school over there.

And if you're 7 and 8 and you're waking up at 4:30, 5 in the morning, you don't feel real good. You're not happy. *[Laughter]* And so I'd grumble and complain, and she'd say, "Listen, this is no picnic for me either, buster." *[Laughter]* But she understood that if her son and later her daughter, my sister, got a good education, even if we didn't have a lot, then the world would open up to us.

And with that support structure that started at home, but then extended to teachers and communities and a country that was willing to give scholarships and folks who were willing to give me a helping hand and sometimes give me second chances when I made mistakes, through all of that, I was able to go to some of the best colleges in the country, even though we didn't have a lot of money.

Michelle, my wife, the daughter of a blue-collar worker and a secretary, was able to go to some of the best schools in the country. And we were able to achieve things that our parents and our grandparents could have never imagined, could have never dreamed of. And I want every young person in America to have that same chance, every single one.

And that's why, in my speech on Tuesday night, I laid out an agenda where we need to grow our economy for everybody, we need to strengthen the middle class, we've got to make it easier for folks to work their way into the middle class. An opportunity agenda that has four parts: more new jobs; making sure folks have the skills to fill those jobs; making sure that we are rewarding hard work with a living wage and incomes; and the thing that I'm here to talk about right here, guaranteeing every young person access to a world-class education, every single one.

Now, sometimes, we only hear the bad news. So I just want to report on some good news. We have made progress when it comes to education in America. Right now our high school graduation rate is the highest that it's been in 30 years. The dropout rate has been falling, and for example, the Latino dropout rate has been cut in half over the last 10 years.

When I came into office, we took on a financial aid system running through the banks that was good for the banks, but wasn't good for students. We reformed it, providing billions of more dollars to millions of more students. And now we've got more young people graduating from college than ever before.

And then, to spark reform, 5 years ago, we started a competition that we call Race to the Top to promote innovation and reform in America's schools. Tennessee was one of the first States to win that competition. And because of that commitment—bringing together educators and parents and businesses and elected officials at State and Federal levels—because of all that, you are actually the fastest improving State in the Nation.

You've given teachers more support. You've founded new ways to identify and reward the best teachers. You've made huge strides in helping young people learn the skills they need for a new economy, skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, science, technology, engineering, math. In Nashville alone, you've boosted graduation rates by almost 20 percent in about a decade. That's something you should be very proud of.

So I want us to take the lessons we've learned and are learning in terms of what's working and make sure more schools are able to do some of the things you're doing. I want to build on

what works. But to do that, we've got to reach more kids, and we've got to do it faster. Because my attitude is, there's no child that we should let slip simply because of politics or because adults can't get their act together. We've got to make sure that we're reaching every single one of them as fast as we can. And right now we're not doing that.

So here's where we should start. Research shows that high-quality early education is one of the best investments we can make in a child's life. We know that. And it's a—not only is it good for the child, it's a smart investment. Every dollar you put into early childhood education, the Government will—taxpayers will save \$7 because you have fewer dropouts, fewer teen pregnancies, fewer—

Audience member. Incarcerations.

The President.—incarcerations. Thank you. [*Laughter*] Folks will get better jobs, pay more taxes. So it's a win-win for everybody.

And last year I asked Congress, help States make high-quality pre-kindergarten available to every 4-year-old in America. Now, the good news is, 30 States have decided to raise some pre-K funding on their own. And school districts like this one have plans to open dedicated pre-K centers with space for hundreds of young kids. And we did get a little help from Congress earlier this month. But while we got a little help, we need more help. Because even with the efforts of your superintendent and folks who are working hard in this school district, there are still going to be some kids who could use the help, but aren't getting it.

So Congress, I'd like to see them act more boldly than they are. But while Congress decides if it's willing to give every child that opportunity, I'm not waiting. So we're going to bring business leaders from all across the country and philanthropists from all across the country who are willing to help work with school districts, mayors, Governors to make sure more young people every single year are getting access to the high-quality pre-K that they need. That's going to be a project over the next 3 years.

We also need to give students access to the world's information. Technology is not the sole answer for a child's education. Having a good teacher is what is most important, and having great parents is even more important than that. But in this modern, 21st-century economy, technology helps. It can be a powerful tool to leverage good teaching.

So last year, I pledged to connect 99 percent of our students to high-speed broadband over 5 years. And with help of the Federal Communications Commission, the FCC, we're making a downpayment on that goal by connecting more than 15,000 schools, 20 million students over the next 2 years, so that there is wireless in every classroom.

And we are going to hit that goal of—there's not going to be a child in a school in America that does not have the kind of wireless connection that allows them to stream in the information they need that can power their education. That's going to be a priority. We've got—[*applause*]. And I want to acknowledge, by the way, we've got companies like Apple, Microsoft, Sprint, Verizon; they're going to help students and teachers use the latest tools to accelerate learning.

Now, we also need to encourage more schools to rethink not just what they teach, but how they teach it. And that's where what you're doing here is so important. If you're a student here, your experience is a little different from students at other high schools. Starting in 10th grade, you get to choose from one of four academies that allow you to focus on a specific subject area.

Local businesses are doing their part by giving students opportunities to connect the lessons you learn in the classroom with jobs that are actually out there to be filled.

So students in the Academy of Business and Finance, they're operating their own credit union here at the school and doing some work in a real one over the summer. If you choose Digital Design and Communication, you get to spend time in a TV studio designed by a local business partner. If you choose the Aviation and Transportation Academy, you get to learn how to operate a 3-D printer and work on your very own airplane. Now, that's pretty cool. I did not get my own plane until I was 47 years old. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. And it's big.

The President. But—yes, it's a nice plane, but I've got to give it back. [*Laughter*] That's the only thing. It's a rental. [*Laughter*]

But the idea is simple, but powerful: Young people are going to do better when they're excited about learning, and they're going to be more excited if they see a connection between what they're doing in the classroom and how it is applied. If they see a connection between—all right, the math that I'm doing here, this connects to the business that's going on out there. The graphic design I'm doing here, I am learning now what that means in terms of marketing or working for a company that actually gets paid to do this, which means I might get paid to do it. And I'm seeing people who may open up for me entire new career options that I didn't even realize.

So that makes words on a page exciting and real and tangible. And then schools like this one teach you everything you need to succeed in college, but because of that hands-on experience, you're able to create pathways to make sure that folks also are able, if they choose not to go to a 4-year institution, potentially get a job sooner.

And it's working. Over the past 9 years, the graduation rate here has gone up 22 percent. [*Applause*] Twenty-two percent. Last year, attendance across the district, which includes 12 academy high schools, was higher than ever. Thousands of students are getting a head start on their future years before many of their peers do. And it's great for businesses because they're developing a pool of workers who already have the skills that they're looking for.

Now, every community is different, with different needs, different approaches. But if Nashville can bring schools and teachers and businesses and parents together for the sake of our young people, then other places can. So that's why my administration is already running a competition to redesign high schools through employer partnerships that combine a quality education with real-world skills and hands-on learning.

I want to encourage more high schools to do what you are doing. That's why we're also in the process of shaking up our system of higher education so that when you graduate from high school ready to succeed in college, it's easier to afford college. And we're also working to help more students pay off their student loan debt once they graduate. A quality education shouldn't be something that those other kids get, it's something that all kids get.

Audience member. Including DREAMers.

The President. Absolutely.

Now, the other day, I heard the story of a recent graduate here named Sara Santiago. Where is Sara? There's Sara right here. I want to—I hope I'm not embarrassing Sara. I'm going to tell her story.

Sara's parents came to America from Guatemala, and she struggled her freshman year—I think she'll admit it. In her own words, she was "one of the bad kids." Now, she doesn't look that bad. *[Laughter]* I promise you, I was bad. *[Laughter]* You might not have been that bad, but probably, you weren't taking your studies that seriously. And then she took a broadcasting class with a teacher named Barclay Randall. Now—*[applause]*. There's Mr. Randall right back there. Go ahead and wave, Mr. Randall. *[Applause]* That's Mr. Randall. Now, Mr. Randall is over there with the press right now because some of his students are covering this event; they're doing some reporting. So—*[applause]*.

But when Sara was in Mr. Randall's class, he helped her discover this passion for filmmaking. And pretty soon, Sara's grades started to improve. So she won the school's best editing award. Then she got an internship with Country Music Television, one of your business partners. And then she was accepted to the prestigious Savanna College of Art and Design. And she gives credit to Mr. Randall for this. She says: "Mr. Randall gave me a second chance. He saw things I never saw in myself. He's the person who helped me change."

Now, giving every student that chance, that's our goal. That's what America is all about. We work and study hard and chase our individual success, but we are also pulling for each other, and we've got each other's backs. And as a nation, we make the investment in every child as if they're our children. Because we're saying to ourselves, if every child is successful, then the world my child grows up in will be more successful. The America that my child grows up in will be more successful.

So there are some lessons that we've got to absorb as a nation. Where we can, we've got to start early. Get to kids when they're 3, 4 years old, because not every parent has got the same resources and we've got to help them get that good start for that child. We've got to make sure that we are supporting our teachers, because they are the most critical ingredient in a school. And we've got to show them how important they are, which means giving them the professional development they need, giving them the support that they need, and giving them the pay that they need.

We've got to make sure that our high schools engage our children. And not every child is going to go on the same path at the same speed, but we can restructure how our high schools operate to make sure every child is engaged. And the more we can link them to real hands-on experience, the more likely they are to be engaged.

And we've got to make college affordable for every young person in America. But we can do all that; we'll still be missing something if we don't capture the spirit that Mr. Randall showed with Sara. That investment in our children, nothing is more important. And it doesn't cost any money, the initial spirit. The spirit then can express itself by us putting more resources into schools that need it.

But that spirit that every child matters, that's something that we can all embrace. We help each other along in good times and bad. And if America pulls together now around our young people, if we do our part to make sure every single child can go as far as their passions and hard work will take them, then we will keep the American Dream alive not just for your generation, but for generations to come.

That's my goal. I hope it is yours too.

Thank you, Nashville, for the great job. Thank you, Raiders. I appreciate you. God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 4:45 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to W. Antoni Sinkfield, pastor, African Methodist Episcopal Church; Ronald Elliott, student, and Robbin Wall, principal, McGavock High School; Jesse Register, director, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools; former Vice President Albert A. Gore, Jr.; and Kevin Barbee, a McGavock High School student who was killed in a shooting on January 29. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng and mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

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