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Remarks at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School

October 17, 2016

Hello, Bulldogs! [*Applause*] Hey! Good to see you guys. How's everybody doing? Oh, you all look good. You look good. Hey! How's everybody?

Well, it is so nice to see you guys. Everybody, have a seat though. Have a seat. I know you've been waiting here a while. Good thing you all had your phones with you. As the father of two teenage daughters, I know the whole time you were just like, "And then, he said—girl, I couldn't believe it." [*Laughter*]

Anyway, it's so good to see you. [*Applause*] Thank you! A couple of people I want to acknowledge. First of all, I want to thank our Secretary of Education, who has done outstanding work, John King is in the house. And then, my great friend and former Education Secretary and multiple winner of the three-on-three contest, as well as at the NBA All-Star Game—he can ball—Arne Duncan. We've got your mayor, Muriel Bowser is here. Give her a big round of applause. Your Representative, Eleanor Holmes Norton. And we are so grateful not only for their service to the country, but the amazing work they're doing with their philanthropic work and America's Promise, Colin and Alma Powell.

So by now you've settled into the new year. Right? Adjusted to classes. You're preparing for Spirit Week. Learning how to ballroom dance. [*Laughter*] I remember having to do that. Getting the nerve to text that cute girl or boy in your English class. [*Laughter*] I don't remember that; we did not have texts. We had to send little notes. And then, we used to actually have to go up to somebody if we liked them and talk to them. So you—that may happen to you someday. [*Laughter*] Seniors are looking at colleges, taking tests, filling out all the forms. And Malia just went through this, so I know how tough this is for you and for the parents.

But as I'm winding down my Presidency, I was so impressed with Banneker the last time I was here in 2011 that I wanted to come back, because you're an example of a school that's doing things the right way. And I believe that if you're going to be able to do whatever you want to do in your lives—if you want to become a teacher or a doctor or start a business or develop the next great app or be President—then you've got to have great education.

We live in a global economy. And when you graduate, you're no longer going to be competing just with somebody here in DC for a great job. You're competing with somebody on the other side of the world, in China or in India, because jobs can go wherever they want because of the Internet and because of technology. And the best jobs are going to go to the people who are the best educated, whether in India or China or anywhere in the world.

So when I took office almost 8 years ago, we knew that our education system was falling short when it came to preparing young people like you for that reality. Our public schools had been the envy of the world, but the world caught up. And we started getting outpaced when it came to math and science education. And African American and Latino students, in part because of the legacy of discrimination, too often lagged behind our White classmates, something called the achievement gap that, by one estimate, costs us hundreds of billions of dollars a year. And we were behind other developed countries when it came to the number of

young people who were getting a higher education. So I said, when I first came into office, by 2020, I want us to be number one again. I want us to be number one across the board.

So we got to work, making real changes to improve the chances for all of our young people, from the time they're born all the way through until they got a career. And the good news is that we've made real progress. So I just wanted to talk to you about the progress we've made, because you are the reason we've made progress: some outstanding young people all across the country.

We recently learned that America's high school graduation rate went up to 83 percent, which is the highest on record. That's good news. More African American and Latino students are graduating than ever before. Right here in DC, in just 5 years, the graduation rate in the District of Columbia public schools went from just 53 percent to 69 percent. So DC's graduation rates grew faster than any other place in the country this year—this past year, which is something to be really proud of.

Now, of course, here at Banneker, you graduated 100 percent of your seniors last year. One hundred percent. It's been a while since I did math, but 100 percent is good. [*Laughter*] You can't do better than that. So what all these numbers mean is that more schools across DC and across the country are starting to catch up to what you guys are doing here at this school.

Now, some of the changes we made were hard, and some of them were controversial. We expected more from our teachers and our students. But the hard work that people have put in across the country has started to pay off.

And I just want to talk to you a little bit about some of the things that we did. It starts with our youngest learners. High-quality early education is one of the best investments we can make, which is why we've added over 60,000 children to Head Start. We called for high-quality preschool for every 4-year-old in America. And when I took office, only 38 States offered access to State-funded preschool. Today, it's up to 46. We're trying to get those last holdouts to do the right thing. And by the way, the District of Columbia leads the Nation with the highest share of children—nearly 9 out of 10—in high-quality preschool. And that's a big achievement.

We launched then a competition called Race to the Top, which inspired States to set higher, better standards so that we could outteach and outcompete other Nations and make sure that we've got high expectations for our students. DC was one of the winners of this competition. It upgraded standards, upgraded curriculum, worked to help teachers build their skills. And that, in part, is why DC has done so well.

We realized that in today's world, when you all have a computer in your pocket in those phones, then you need to learn not just how to use a phone, you need to learn computer science. So we're working with private and philanthropic partners to bring high schools into the 21st century and give you a more personalized and real-world experience. We're bringing in high-speed Internet into schools and libraries, reaching 20 million more students and helping teachers with digital learning. And coding isn't, by the way, just for boys in Silicon Valley, so we're investing more in getting girls and young women and young people of color and low-income students into science and engineering and technology and math.

And because we know that nothing is more important than a great teacher—and you've got some great teachers here, as well as a great principal at Banneker—we have focused on preparing and developing and supporting and rewarding excellent educators. You all know how hard they work. They stay up late grading your assignments. That's why you've got all those marks all over your papers. [*Laughter*] They pull sometimes money out of their own pockets to

make that lesson extra special. And I promise you, the teachers here and the teachers around the country, they're not doing it for the pay, because teachers, unfortunately, still aren't paid as much as they should be. They're not doing it for the glory. They're doing it because they love you and they believe in you and they want to help you succeed.

So teachers deserve more than just our gratitude—they deserve our full support. And we've got to make their lives easier, which is why we enacted a law to fix No Child Left Behind, which gives teachers more flexibility to spend more time teaching creatively than just spending all their time teaching to a test. Give your teachers a big round of applause. They deserve it.

So we've made real progress, but here's the thing—and I think all of you know this because you go to this great school—a high school education these days is not enough. By 2020, two out of three job openings require some form of higher education. Now, that doesn't always mean a 4-year college degree, but it does mean—whether it's a 4-year university or a community college or some sort of training program—you've got to get a little bit more than just what you're getting in high school.

It used to be that a high school job might be enough because you could go into a factory or even go into an office and just do some repetitive work, and if you were willing to work hard, you could make a decent living. But the problem is, repetitive work now is done by machines. And that's just going to be more and more true. So in order for you to succeed in the marketplace, you've got to be able to think creatively; you've got to be able to work with a team; you've got to be able to work with a machine and figure out how to make it tailored for the specific requirements of your business and your job. All those things require some more sophisticated thinking than just sitting there and just doing the same thing over and over again. And that's why you've got to have more than just a high school education.

And if you doubt that, I just want to give you some statistics. If—compared to a high school diploma, just getting a degree from a 2-year school,—going to a community college and getting an associate's degree—could earn you more than $300,000 over the course of your lifetime. And a 4-year degree earns you a million dollars more than if you just had a high school degree. Think about that. I mean, a million dollars, that's real money.

So one of the things that we're trying to do is to make it easier for you to access free money for college, to figure out how you can pay for your college without having a mountain of debt. And the key thing, as you know here at Banneker, but I want all the students around the country to do this—and Michelle and I and others have been really emphasizing this—is to fill out your FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

How many people—how many seniors here have already filled out their FAFSA forms? All right. How many seniors here have not filled out their FAFSA forms? Fess up now. [*Laughter*] You sure? All right, I just want to make sure now. And, juniors, you can start getting ready now.

Because what the FAFSA does is, it puts you in the running for scholarships, grants, loans, work-study jobs, all to help you pay for college. And we've made it simpler than ever. And it's available right now at FAFSA.gov—FAFSA.gov. And since this is one of the most important investments of your life, next year's FAFSA is also going to direct you to something we created called our College Scorecard.

Now, here's what this is. It gives you comprehensive information on every college in America. Now, some of you who have started applying for colleges, you know about these college rankings, right? It's, like, oh, this is the best school. And some of that information is

useful; some of it not so much. But unlike traditional rankings that focus on which school has the fanciest dorm or the nicest football stadiums or is the most expensive or the most exclusive, what our College Scorecard does is, it focuses on some of the things that really matter for your future. Things like how many students actually graduate from the school, because it's not enough just to enroll in college; you've got to graduate from college. How much money do their alumni earn? What percentage of their students can pay back their loans? And what we've done is, we've worked with companies like Google to put this information right at your fingertips.

So for a decision this important, we want you to be able to comparison shop to figure out how do you get the best value for your money, just like if you were buying something on Amazon. Right? If you were buying a car or you're buying a phone or you're buying anything, especially if it's a pretty big purchase, you want to know ahead of time, is this legit? And what this does is makes you think about what your options are.

Now, you've got some great counselors here. Obviously, you should work with them. But not every student may be going to a school like Banneker that has as many good counselors to think about their college education. And using this College Scorecard is going to be helpful for them to do a little comparison shopping. Because you don't want to go to the school just because it's the closest one, and it turns out, it's more expensive and doesn't do as good of a job as if you were willing to maybe travel someplace else, and it turns out that you could get the financial aid you need to go to a school that's more suited toward your needs. Right?

So we also reformed, by the way, the student loan system. When I came into office, you had tens of billions of dollars that were going to big banks, serving as middlemen for your student loans. We said, well, let's cut out the banks. Let's give the money directly to the students so they can afford college, and we can make the loans cheaper, and we can expand Pell grants.

And now, what we're trying to do is to push to make 2 years of community college free for every responsible student all across the country. [*Applause*] All across the country. And we're starting to work with colleges around—and universities around the country to bring down the cost of college so that at the end of 4 years of college you're not saddled with a whole bunch of debt, because nobody should be priced out of a higher education.

So bottom line is, higher graduation rates, higher college attendance rates; more money for Pell grants and work to make sure that the interest rate on student loans haven't gone up; working to expand early childhood education and preschool; continuing to watch and work with States as they try to implement reforms to make K through 12 better; holding colleges more accountable for giving information so that students can make good decisions—we've made a lot of progress. We have made a lot of progress in terms of making sure that young people across the country get the kind of great education that you're getting here at Banneker. And I am really proud of what we've accomplished. I'm proud of what the District of Columbia has accomplished.

But I just want to be honest with you: We've still got more work to do. So as I go, I'm giving you kind of a final report card, transcript on what more we've got to get done. [*Laughter*]

There are still too many States that are cutting back on public education. And part of the reason tuition is going up is because States aren't putting as much money into State education,

universities, community colleges as they used to. That's why, if you're 18, by the way, you've got to vote to make sure that the folks who represent you actually are delivering.

We've still got too many States that have not really worked in a serious way to raise standards and improve performance. In too many school districts, we still have schools that, despite the heroic efforts of a lot of great teachers, are not fully preparing our kids for success because they just don't have the resources to do it or the structure to do it. We've still got too many high schools where a third of their students do not earn their diplomas on time.

For too many students in America, ZIP Code still determines how far they'll go. And that's not acceptable. Some of you probably have friends or family who are just as smart or talented or as capable as you, but they didn't have the same support or the right opportunities or didn't get in the right school, and so now don't have the same shot at success. Am I right? Because I know that's true in our family. Michelle and I, we've got cousins and friends who we've known since they were tiny, shorties, little kids—[*laughter*]—and they—we know how smart they are because they were just as smart as we were, but just the luck of the draw was, they didn't get the same chance as we did. And that's not right.

So that's why I started something called "My Brother's Keepers" initiative, because what we want to do is help more young people—especially kids of color—get mentorships and the resources and the guidance they need to succeed. And I'm going to stay involved with that even after I'm done being President. Because we all have a part to play in making sure every single child has every single opportunity to achieve his or her dreams.

That's what Banneker is all about. That's what you can see in somebody like Ifunanya. I mean, that's an incredible young lady who's going to succeed because she has an incredible school in addition to an incredible family. And so we're so proud of her.

There's another person I want to just call out, Amari McDuffie. Where's Amari? Where's Amari? There she is right there, right in front. So, hey, Amari. [*Laughter*] I'm going to talk about you for a second. [*Laughter*]

So Amari was born with a heart and a lung condition. And sometimes, she had to miss a lot of school because of her illness. And you know, Banneker is a pretty rigorous school, so she was worried about staying on top of her work. But everybody in this family rallied around her and made sure she was keeping up. Her history teacher, Mr. Goldfarb—where's Mr. Goldfarb? Is he here or did he cut assembly? [*Laughter*] So Mr. Goldfarb came to visit her when Amari was in the hospital for weeks, bought a—brought a card from the whole class. And so Amari, she was talking about the support everybody here gave her, and she said, "I believed in myself because my teachers believed in me."

And that's the kind of community that we want in every school, where you're looking out for each other and you're taking care of one another. And so now Amari plans to be a doctor so she can help kids who had illnesses like hers. And that's what's possible when we're all committed to each other's success; when we understand that no matter what you look like, where you come from, what faith you are, what—whether you're a boy or a girl—that you should have great opportunities to succeed. And that requires you to put effort into it.

Michelle and I talk a lot, because we travel around the world, and sometimes, we forget that there are places around the world where people have so little, but the kids are so hungry for an education. And they don't even have an actual roof over their head in some of their schools. And so even if you're really poor in this country, you can succeed if you want to invest in the teachers and the community and everybody raises standards and believes in each other.

And that's what we want all of America to believe, in every kid, because there's magic in each and every one of you. And we just have to help you unleash it and nurture it and realize it.

And, by the way, it's because of young people like you that I leave the Presidency never more optimistic than I am right now, because I've met so many young people around the country whose energy and excitement and how you treat each other with respect. That gives me a lot of confidence, a lot of faith for our country.

So I know you guys are going to keep on working hard. You're going to keep making our communities proud. If us adults do our part and we stay focused on making sure every school is as great as this one and that every young person has those same opportunities and everybody has a teacher like Mr. Goldfarb looking out for them, I've got no doubt that we're going to continue to build a country where everybody has the chance to make of their lives what they will. And that's what America is all about.

All right. Proud of you, Bulldogs. Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Fill out those FAFSA forms! Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:21 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and his wife Alma J. Powell, chair, America's Promise Alliance; Anita M. Berger, principal, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School; and Ifunanya Chukwu Azikiwe, student, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, who introduced the President.

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