

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

Remarks Honoring the National and State Teachers of the Year and an Exchange With Reporters

April 27, 2022

The President. Thank you. Thank you, Kurt. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Secretary—Secretary Cardona, thank you. And I want to thank Jill. Jill is the Nation's first First Lady to work full time as a professor—as a teacher. She taught high school, and she teaches at a community college for a long time now.

We made a deal that—she was so—teaching is not what Jill does, it's who she is, like most of you—who you are, what you believe. And so when we got elected—the Presidency and as Vice President, as well—I suggested, and she agreed fully, that she should continue to teach. And people said, "What?" [*Laughter*] Well, she teaches 14 credits a semester at community college full time, and she does her job.

And you know, I'm very, very supportive of teachers for a number of reasons; some of them are personal. But if I didn't support teachers, I'd be sleeping alone in one of these bedrooms up here. [*Laughter*]

You know, before I begin the formal comments, one of the things that Jill reminded me of when she spoke—and I'll bet all of you can give examples as well—I had—I got lucky. I won the lottery, in terms of parents; my mother and father were wonderful people. I had one of those moms that everybody wished had been their mom, for real. Everybody hung at my house.

But I also was a bit of a runt, in terms of my size. And I used to ta—ta—ta—talk like this. [*Laughter*] I stuttered badly. And when you stutter, everyone thinks you have to be either stupid or totally incompetent. And if you notice, it's the only infirmity a child can talk about—an adult can talk about having had that people—you didn't because you're teachers—think they can laugh, think it's funny. If you saw the movie "The King's Speech," you understand. You understand.

We went to see it, Jill and I, and right as the King was standing at the racetrack making the speech, she reached over—I guess I tightened up somehow; it brought back all my—all the memories. And I look back on it now and I wonder, besides I really got lucky with my parents—my mother would say: "Look at me, Joey. Look at me. You're smarter than anybody here. You're this. You're that. So stop. You can do this."

My point is this: that I had teachers—I can name the ones through grade school, high school, and even college. I didn't really beat my stuttering, and still occasionally I do, until I was—took speech and debate class in college just to force myself to be able to stand up.

When they sent me the copy—the guy who wrote "The King's Speech" found the original speech and made a copy of it and sent it to me—no, I mean, from the movie. And he does his speeches exactly like I did, which a nun taught me. If you took a look at my speech, you'll see that there's all these slash marks in the speech. Because, you know, an awful lot of people who are—I can't sing worth a damn, but the people—entertainers and singers can sing like a nightingale, but can't talk, can't speak.

And I look back on my life, and I think, beyond my family—my sister, my brother, my mom, my dad—the people who made a difference in my life, in a fundamental way, were teachers. I remember—I was talking on the way over. This—my staff is going, "Why aren't you giving the speech we wrote?" [*Laughter*]

But I remember—I truly remember—and we were talking about it on the way over—what got me involved in politics. I got into politics—involved in politics, because I think the greatest sin that anyone can commit is the abuse of power, whatever that power is—the power of a teacher, the power of a doctor, the power of a leader. When someone who is relying on you or you cannot—just the abuse of power.

And I got involved because my State was the only State in the Union, when Dr. King was murdered, that was occupied by the National Guard for 10 months with drawn bayonets in every corner because we had a very conservative Governor who ordered the National Guard and—because my State has the eighth largest Black population in America as a percent of population.

And I had a job with the—one of the oldest law firms in the State. And I quit and became a public defender; that's what got me involved.

But again, where teachers come in: I was—I had no intention of running for public office. Everybody thought Biden knew he wanted to be President at the time he was in 6 grade or something. I love these biographies. *[Laughter]*

But here's the deal: What I did do—I wanted to get engaged. And so we had a very, very conservative Democratic Party in my State. And I thought it was—I thought it was wrong on civil rights. The more progressive party was the Republican Party because we were a southern Democratic Party. We're a slave State to our great shame, early on. We fought on the side of the North, like Maryland did, and four—two other States, but we were a border State.

And that's what got me going. And so, I was asked by a group of senior lawyers whether or not I'd join a thing called a "New Democratic Coalition." And the reason I bother to tell you that was how to reform the party, how to bring it into the—you know, the 21st century—the 20th century, at the time.

And one day after being asked to see if I can help recruit someone to run for the United States Senate against a very popular Republican—Democrat—Republican Senator, a group of Senator—a former Senator, a former Congressman, and two former Governors came to me and said, "We want you to run." And I wasn't even old enough. I was 29 years old.

And I thought, "This is crazy." But I remember going home from that convention, and the first stop I made was to speak to a professor named Dr. Ingersoll, who was one of those professors who was—my philosophy professor in political science. And I stopped him, and I told him what was going on. And he looked at me, and I'll never forget what he said. He said, "You should do it." I said, "I can't do that." I never even knew anybody who was in the Senate.

And he looked at me; he said: "Remember what Plato said. And I'll paraphrase it," he said. "The penalty good people pay for not being involved in politics is being governed by people worse than themselves." *[Laughter]* But my generic point is this: He gave me the confidence, as a 29-year-old kid with no money, to run. He gave me the confidence. Just like the nun would tell me, "Joey, Joey, you can do this." It gave me the confidence.

And I think about it. You're going to think about, 20 years from now, how did you end up standing on the podium in the White House? *[Laughter]* No, you didn't ever expect that. I wonder how I got here. I got here because of my parents and my teachers. My teachers.

And so, folks, you know, that idea is exemplified by the National Teacher of the Year. Kurt, you have and I have something in common though. I'm—I was an adjunct professor in law school for years teaching an advanced course in separation of powers. And I taught to get—to get money when I was at Syracuse Law School. To get through law school, I was a substitute teacher. You should be nicer to them.

[At this point, the President made the sign of the cross.]

Whew! *[Laughter]* But that's not what Kurt and I have in common. What we have in common is, we both married women who are smarter than we are. *[Laughter]* This is an assistant dean at Oberlin College, one of the finest colleges in the country.

Kurt teaches history; he taught 25 years. In fact, he teaches in the same town, in the same district he grew up in.

And by the way, when I left the Vice Presidency, I had a chance to do a number of things. But I became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and—Presidential politics. And I—it was—I enjoyed it, but it's hard. That's another thing people don't realize: It's hard. How much you prepare.

I had a three-credit course I taught in law school. I would literally, every single—I didn't want to do it during the week because I didn't want people to say I'm taking away from my job as a Senator, so I did it on Saturdays at Delaware Law School.

I would prepare—Jill will tell you—3 to 4 hours every single—before every class. And it was what—not only I taught, but—what I did as chairman of the Judiciary Committee. I taught about separation of powers. It was what I did my whole life. And it took me all that time. But the point is: It really mattered.

You know—you know, I love what this guy said in his classroom about—he said his classroom—he said, "We listen to each other and respect people's opinion." Well, part of this is all about fundamentally teaching respect. While we might be in the opposite sides of hot topics, we're on the same side in terms of having respect for one another.

Kurt, I understand you wanted to go back home to be a teacher because your teachers inspired you. I'll bet every one of you can name one or two teachers who fundamentally impacted your lives.

Well, you know, I think you've paid it forward many times over, old buddy—*[laughter]*—and—transforming the lives of your students in Oberlin, Ohio, helping students see themselves in you. That's what happens, I think. And helping all your students not only learn history, but see what they—that they have a role in shaping history—I mean in a literal sense.

And to the Delaware Teacher of the Year, where—where were you, Jahsha? Where's my Delaware Teacher of the Year? I've got to admit, we're the second smallest State, but I'm a little prejudiced on behalf of the State. *[Laughter]* I know there are a lot of eighth graders at Brandywine who are feeling confident and more comfortable because of your help. Jill taught at the same school when she was in Delaware, at Brandywine school—high school.

And even though Teacher—Appreciation Week officially starts next week, I wanted to get us started earlier. It's an honor for me and the First Lady and Secretary Cardona to recognize the Teachers of the Year from 50 different States. And it really is something we look forward.

I had—I did a eulogy today for a brilliant woman, the former Secretary of State. And I sat in the front row with two other Presidents who were also there to honor her. And I told them what I was doing. And they all talked about how much they enjoyed the years they were here with the Teacher of the Year event.

Over the past 2 years, though, the entire country has witnessed the extraordinary dedication and resolve of our Nation's teachers. Early in the pandemic, teachers and teachers' aides had to—had to do—not just be educators, you had to be tech support, you had to be moral support, you had to be—you had to be health support. I mean, you had to take care of your own children in addition.

And I watched how hard it was, how really hard. There was so much heroic work to help kids connect, get connected to schools, and just the socialization that they were missing in so many places for so long. It's estimated they're 5 to 7 months behind in their education right now.

The American people saw it. Because guess what? When you're taught remotely from home, the moms and dads understood what you were doing. *[Laughter]* And that—no, and they know they realized how damn hard it is. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious.

I think it was—you know, my mother used to say, "Out of everything bad, something good will happen if you look hard enough for it." I think that was the upside. The American people became: "Whoa. My goodness." And they understand what you've been saying for years. That you are professional, all of you. All of you have a responsibility to make sure you have what you need, and we have a responsibility to make sure we have what you need to educate our children safely so they have a chance, a chance to achieve their dreams, dreams they don't even know they have—they don't even know they have.

That's why I made it a priority to get educators vaccinated and reopen our schools quickly. We made a historic commitment to our schools—\$130 billion in the Rescue Plan—\$130 billion. It helped us go from 50 percent of our schools being closed to 99 percent of schools open and safe—better heating, air conditioning, and ventilation systems, safer buildings. It isn't a thriving building until it comes alive, though, with teachers and students.

With the help of the American Rescue Plan, local governments were able to—as the State officials here can tell you—in education—were able to add a record 279,000 new educators in 2021—two hundred and seventy—50,000—another 50,000 jobs—teaching jobs in the first months of 2022.

In January, compared to the period before the pandemic, schools have increased their number of social workers by 65 percent, counselors by 17 percent. You're expected to do everything. You're expected to not only teach, you're expected to be a guidance counselor yourself, but you're also expected to deal with the problems that they have at home.

You see it. You can see it in their faces when they walk into school and, as Jill said, just by the way they answer the questions—and questions about how they're doing, how they're feeling. And you need help. You need social workers. You need school psychologists and psychiatrists. You need that kind of help.

And the American Rescue Plan funds are especially important now that we see the impact that this pandemic exacted on our children. As I've said, students have lost months of learning and particularly reading and math. It's not just academic skills they've fallen behind on, teachers are seeing young children struggle to interact in group settings, to manage conflict, to take turns. They've got a learning—a lot of learning to make up. And we're doing everything we can to help you. I want to know—I want input from you as well, because we have a lot of teachers, we seek their input.

Using funds from the American Rescue Plan, schools are providing and expanding summer learning—summer learning and tutoring programs to give students the extra time and attention they need to catch up and develop those fundamental math and reading skills.

You all know, if you get far behind in first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh grade, it takes a lot of time to make up. And if you lose your confidence, it even gets harder. So I urge more States, counties, and cities and towns to use their American Rescue Plan funding, which is in the billions of dollars, to hire more teachers, more tutors, more critical personnel in our schools.

Now we have an opportunity to make even more game-changing investments for educators, students, and families. We're in a competition for leading the 21st century. Not a joke. That's what we're—that's where we are right now.

You know, parenthetically, if you think about it: What was the reason why we led the world—beginning around nineteen-five, -six, and -seven, and -eight? Because we became the first nation in the world to have universal education of 1 through 12, for everybody—no matter what, without cost.

Well, guess what? If we were sitting down today, deciding we were going to set up an education system, raise your hand if any of you think 12 years is enough in the 21st century? Just 12 years. Things are moving too rapidly. They're changing exponentially.

And as Jill said, any country that outeducates us is going to outcompete us. It's that basic. So we have to build a 21st century, because the rest of the world isn't waiting. We have to build for it.

One of the tough images of the pandemic was children sitting in their cars with their mother or dad or older brother or sister in a McDonald's parking lot because that's the only way they could get on Wi-Fi to do their homework. This is the United States of America, for God's sake. The United States of America.

If we didn't know it before, we know now: High-speed internet is essential. That's why we're spending tens of billions to make sure that we have high-speed internet available to everyone—rural America, inner-city America, suburban America—throughout every single school system in America. That's part of the whole legislation we passed in terms of infrastructure.

It's starting now; it's going to create millions of jobs as well. For real. But again, we've got to get in the 21st century. We've got to move. And I—the budget I proposed supports schools, supports students, and supports you.

The bridge—to bridge the gap between underresourced schools and their wealthier counterparts, we're proposing a \$19 billion increase in title I schools—the most historically neglected and underfunded schools in our Nation. We've got to get—we've got to let them catch up. That investment would more than double the current funding of title I schools.

And also proposing the largest increase in special education funding in 2 decades. We made the promise; we've never filled—fulfilled it. We've got to fulfill it. We've got to add another billion-dollar commitment with the goal of doubling the number of social workers, school counselors, and school nurses in K through 12. And by the way, thanks to the American Rescue Plan, we're making real progress towards that goal.

And to support you, the educators, my budget includes \$610 million to increase teacher diversity, effectiveness, and retention. This is key. Because, as all of you know, it takes time to become a teacher—the teachers you are today. But nearly 1 in 10 teachers leave the profession every year, with the youngest teachers being the most likely ones to leave first. So we've got to invest in ways to keep them in the profession.

This year, my administration helped over 150 public servants, including teachers, get—150,000—get school forgive—forgiveness loans for college loans through changes we made in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program. The last team kind of messed it up. We've cleared it up. *[Laughter]* No, but I really mean it. Because if you go—if you—anyway, well, I won't go into it. *[Laughter]*

Just go to that website. To learn how these changes can benefit you, and I encourage you to go to studentaid.gov, and you're going to find you can have, in many of your cases, your entire student debt wiped out, because you are teaching and that's considered a vital profession.

One more thing. It's not enough to give teachers praise. We ought to give you a raise.

And so—and I have to really listen to you, which I know Senator Cardona has been doing. And we should stand up for you. We should have your back. Teaching is one of the hardest jobs in this country to be able to do it well, and one of the most important.

Today, there are too many politicians trying to score political points, trying to ban books—even math books. I mean, did you ever think—even you younger teachers—did you ever think, when you'd be teaching, that you'd be worried about book burnings and banning books, all because it doesn't fit somebody's political agenda?

American teachers have dedicated their lives to teaching our children and lifting them up. We've got to stop making them the target of the culture wars. That's where this is going.

Let me close with this, because I know—if I know anything about teachers, I know that some of you were probably grading papers on the way here. *[Laughter]* By the way, Jill traveled with me around the world. I'd say: "Jill, leave the binder. Leave the bag here." *[Laughter]* And by the way, how many are math teachers? Raise your hand. She envies the hell out of you. She thinks your job is easier. You just have to check if they know the answer. *[Laughter]*

She teaches writing. *[Laughter]* But she gets off the plane—am I joking?—with up to 50, 60 papers she's grading on Air Force One. *[Laughter]* I mean, I said, "Jill"—she's walking down the, you know—*[laughter]*—you think I'm kidding you? I'm not kidding with you. I'm—this is deadly earnest.

So—and many of you are trying to figure out how you're going to—if you have class tomorrow, you may not and you may be here for the—tomorrow. But on Monday, are you ready for your class? Are you prepared? Do you have your lesson plan together?

Because you know—look, these aren't—we always talk about "these children." They're not someone else's children. They're our children. And they are the kite strings that literally lift our national ambitions aloft in a literal sense. Think about it.

If you got to do one thing to make sure the Nation succeeded in the next two generations, what would you do? You'd want—I would say, literally, have the best educated public in the world. Have our students gain confidence enough to know what they can do, to reach in. We have an obligation. We have an obligation to help them teach and reach their potential.

You've heard me say it many times about our children, but it's true: They're all our children. And the reason you're the Teachers of the Year is because you recognize that. They're not somebody else's children; they're like yours when they're in the classroom. You represent a profession that helps them gain the confidence, a confidence they believe they can do anything.

Again, think of your own lives. Think of where you gained the confidence beyond your family, God willing you're able to.

And you know what else we're finding out? We're having a big fight about it now, but I'm going to get it done eventually, or someone will. And that is that we've learned now—you all know those who—of you in the teaching profession know that if you come from a broken home or a home that has a single parent—and there may be a drug problem or something, from a very poor home—you're going to end up hearing a million words—fewer words spoken by the time you get to first grade than from a kid coming from an average middle class home. Not different words, just words spoken, because they're not engaged in it.

And also, we've learned that if in fact you have kids go to school at 3 years old and 4 years old and 5 years old, you'll increase exponentially—by 57 percent—the likelihood that they will

make it no matter what their background, all the way through 12 years of school and probably beyond. It matters. It matters.

And for so—for that and so much more that you do, you believe in these kids. And I know some of them are really difficult. *[Laughter]* I get it. But you believe in them. And you know: When they know you believe in them, they believe in you.

So thank you for what you do. You are—if I get to have one profession that's the best in the world—not a joke—it's you who I want to be the best profession in the world, because you affect what this country looks like, what it will act like, what it will be like, its success or failure, more than any other group of Americans, period.

So thank you for what you do. Keep it going. And I promise you, Jill has your back—*[laughter]*—and mine. *[Laughter]*

Thank you very much.

Q. Are you honored that Delaware is represented, Mr. President

The President. *[Inaudible]* Thank you all very, very much.

Participant. Thank you, Mr. President.

Release of U.S. Citizen Trevor Reed Detained in Russia

Q. Mr. President, how did the release just happen, given the invasion and what's going on?

The President. Say again?

Q. Are you surprised Trevor Reed was released by Russia, given the invasion?

The President. I did it.

Q. How?

The President. I raised it.

Q. How though?

The President. It was 3 months ago.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:35 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to 2022 National Teacher of the Year Kurt Russell, history teacher, Oberlin High School in Oberlin, OH, who introduced the President, and his wife Donna Russell, assistant dean for student support, Oberlin College; 2022 Delaware State Teacher of the Year Jahsha Tabron, special education teacher, Brandywine High School in Wilmington, DE; former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, who died on March 23; and former Presidents William J. Clinton and Barack Obama. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens.

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national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, repayment options; Education : School coronavirus prevention efforts, Federal support; Education : School improvement and renovation; Education : Teachers; Education, Department of : Secretary; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Medals, decorations, and awards : National and State Teachers of the Year; Russia : Detained U.S. citizen, release.

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