

May 21 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

My High School Reform initiative would support innovative reforms to improve student achievement in high schools, such as expanding the connections between adults and students that are necessary for effective learning and healthy personal development. This new initiative would provide resources to help transform 5,000 high schools into places where students receive individual attention, are motivated to learn, are provided with challenging courses, and are encouraged to develop and pursue long-term educational and career goals.

Fourth, in response to clear evidence that standards-based reforms work best when States have strong accountability systems in place, my proposal would encourage each State to establish a single, rigorous accountability system for all schools. The bill also would require States to end social promotion and traditional retention practices; phase out the use of teachers with emergency certificates and the practice of assigning teachers “out-of-field;” and implement sound discipline policies in every school. Finally,

the bill would give parents an important new accountability tool by requiring State, district, and school-level report cards that will help them evaluate the quality of the schools their children attend.

Based on high standards for all students, high-quality professional development for teachers, safe and disciplined learning environments, and accountability to parents and taxpayers, the Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999 provides a solid foundation for raising student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers. More important, it will help prepare all of our children, and thus the Nation, for the challenges of the 21st century. I urge the Congress to take prompt and favorable action on this proposal.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,
May 21, 1999.

The President’s Radio Address *May 22, 1999*

Good morning. It’s been just over a month since 15 students and a teacher lost their lives at Columbine High School. On Thursday Hillary and I traveled to Littleton, Colorado, to visit with the families of the victims and the students of Columbine. They’re brave, good people, full of faith, determined that the children lost will not be forgotten, dedicated to doing whatever they can to make our schools and our children safe. All of us in Washington and in every community in America owe them the same dedication.

As if we needed another reminder, on Thursday, as I was going to Littleton, a young man opened fire at his high school in Conyers, Georgia, wounding several of his classmates. No child should have to worry that a classmate is carrying a loaded gun to school. No parent should have to fear sending a child to school. And no American should tolerate this level of violence against our children. There is no task more urgent. Every one of us has a role to play.

First, Government must do more to protect our children from guns. We’re making progress. This week was a turning point in our long efforts. I’m so pleased that the Senate passed key elements of my commonsense plan to address gun violence: mandatory child safety locks with every new handgun; a lifetime ban on gun purchases by violent juveniles; a nationwide ban on the importation of high-capacity ammunition clips and juvenile possession of assault weapons; and finally, after a tie-breaking vote cast by Vice President Gore, mandatory background checks on gun sales at gun shows.

I’m pleased that Speaker Hastert has agreed that we should also close that deadly loophole and also raise the age of handgun ownership to 21. Now I call on the House to take immediate action. I hope the House of Representatives will pass every one of these commonsense efforts that the Senate has passed to protect our children from guns. And I hope they’ll do it before school lets out.

Protecting our children from guns is important, but it's just one step. The media and entertainment industry have enormous power in our children's lives, and they must take responsibility, too. By the time he or she reaches 18 years old, the average child has watched 40,000 killings over the media. There are now hundreds of studies that show that these viewings actually desensitize our children to the horror and the evil of violence and its consequences and that this has greater impacts on more vulnerable children.

Now, here, too, we've made some progress, with the TV ratings and the V-chip to enforce them, with video ratings, with new screening devices for the Internet which parents can use. But we must do more. Last week I issued three specific challenges to the entertainment community, from keeping guns out of ads and previews that children might see, so that we don't market violence to children when we say we're not showing it to them in the programs; to strictly enforcing the ratings in theaters and video stores, where they're often not enforced at all; to reevaluating the PG rating itself, to ensure that movies approved for viewing by our children do not contain gratuitous violence.

Schools must also do more with violence prevention and peer mediation efforts, with effective counseling programs and, when necessary, access to mental health services. Next month, under the leadership of Tipper Gore, we will host a White House Conference on Mental Health and talk about how we can reach out to troubled young people.

Students should work harder to promote respect among all groups at schools, not the kind of hostility and demeaning conduct and remarks we too often see when groups become gangs or cliques.

Finally, parents must take primary responsibility, paying attention to the shows their children watch, the webpages they visit, refusing to buy products that glorify violence, and, above all, staying involved in their children's lives,

making sure that no child crosses the line between the healthy desire for independence and the potentially deadly alienation.

Last week at the White House, we committed to launch a national campaign to turn back the tide of violence. We need a grassroots effort in every community, involving all sectors of society to connect every child, to help all parents do their jobs better, to use every known prevention technique, to lobby for sensible changes in the law and in practice. It worked when Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and then Students Against Drunk Driving, decided we didn't have to tolerate the death on our highways. It's working now with grassroots efforts on teen pregnancy all across America and with efforts among grassroots business people to hire people off welfare. It will work here if the American people determine to make it work.

Now, here in Washington, we can't once again let the gears of politics as usual grind our urgency into dust. The signs of the past week are very hopeful, but we have to keep at it. We can't forget the children of Columbine and all the other children who were lost because their culture, their society, is too violent, their laws too lax.

The American spirit is stronger than the forces of hate. This is a very good time for our country, and we have made so much progress. Now we must, and we will, find the strength to do whatever it takes to give our children a safer future.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 1:20 p.m. on May 21 in the Oval Office at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on May 22. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 21 but was embargoed for release until the broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Thomas J. (T.J.) Solomon, Jr., alleged gunman in the Heritage High School shooting in Conyers, GA, on May 20.