

May 3 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

schools, and we ought to give the States enough money to repair another 5,000 schools every single year for the next 5 years. The students of this country and their families deserve it.

Back in 1907 this high school was called, I quote, “a high school for the future.” Back then the population of Davenport was 39,000, about a third of what it is today, and Central High had half the number of students it does now. It was a high school for the future. You have some new renovations planned over the next 2 years, which I hope will make it a high school for the future again. But I want every single school in America to be a school of the future. You need it. You deserve it. And if the Congress will pass my proposal, we will help you get it.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:27 p.m. in the auditorium. In his remarks, he referred to teacher Barbara Hess, who introduced the President, principal Henry L. Caudle, student body president Kelly L. Witt, and senior class president Frederick L. (Ricky) Harris III, Central High School; Gov. Tom Vilsack and Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson of Iowa; Mayor Philip Yerington of Davenport, IA; Mayor Stanley F. Leach of Moline, IL; Mayor Bill Ward of East Moline, IL; Mayor Mark W. Schwiebert of Rock Island, IL; and Jim Blanche, superintendent, Davenport School District.

Remarks at the City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota *May 4, 2000*

Thank you very much. Well, after Tom and Milo talked, I don’t know that I need to say much of anything. I thank you for what you said and for the example you have set. And I want to say a little more about Milo and this school in a moment. I’d like to thank my friend Bruce Vento for not only doing a superb job in representing the people of his community and, indeed, the people of Minnesota in the United States House of Representatives but also being a wonderful friend and adviser to me these last 7 years and a few months. You should be very proud of Bruce Vento. He’s a very, very good man. Thank you.

When Lieutenant Governor Schunk told me that she was going to visit every school district in Minnesota, I was wishing I were the Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota. That sounds like a good job to me. I thank you. And Mr. Mayor, thank you for being here today. It’s good to see you again, and it’s good to be back in your community.

There are a number of other people I would like to acknowledge, and doubtless I will miss some, but I’d like to thank Education Commissioner Jax for being here, and Superintendent Harvey, Majority Leader of the Senate Roger Moe. The mayor of Minneapolis I think is here, Sharon Sayles Belton; former Attorney General

Skip Humphrey. I’d like to thank State Senator Ember Reichgott Junge, a longtime friend of mine, and former State Representative Becky Kelso, who were the original cosponsors of the charter school legislation; the Charter Friends National Network director, Jon Schroeder, who drafted the original Federal charter law, which we adopted; the Center for School Change director, Joe Nathan, a longtime personal friend of mine with whom I worked for many years.

And I’d like to acknowledge some people who came on this tour with me, some of whom who have been very active in the charter school movement for a long time: the president of the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, Will Marshall; the president of the New Schools Venture Fund, Kim Smith; the policy director of the National Urban League, Bill Spriggs; and a longtime friend and city council member from New York City, Guillermo Linares. And they’re over here to my right. They’ve come a long way to be with you, to see this first charter school in the United States. So I hope you’ll make them—[*applause*].

When I was listening to Milo Cutter and Tom Gonzalez talk first about this school, how it got started, what its mission is, and then hearing Tom talk about his life and how his then-girlfriend and present wife got him into this

school, it reminded me of all the struggles that I have seen the charter school movement go through throughout the United States and reaffirmed my conviction that every effort has been worth it.

There are a lot of people here in this room who have devoted a lot of their lives to trying to help young people in trouble. I was delighted to hear Milo mention Hazel O'Leary's support for this school. She was my first Energy Secretary. And I want to thank, in particular, one person who's made an extraordinary commitment to helping young people lead the lives of their dreams and avoid the lives of their nightmares, my good friend Supreme Court Justice Alan Page, who's out here. Thank you, Alan, for everything you have done.

The idea behind charter schools is that not all kids are the same—they have different needs; they have different environments—but there is a certain common level of education that all kids need, no matter how different they are, and that it would be a good thing to allow schools to be developed which had a clear mission, which could reach out to kids who wanted to be a part of that mission, who could achieve educational excellence for children who otherwise might be left behind or, to use Tom's phrase, might fall through the cracks.

It is true that when I ran for President in 1992, Minnesota had the only public charter school in the country, this one. And so when I went around the country talking about charter schools, most people thought I had landed from another planet, because most people hadn't been here. Most people still haven't been here to this school. But I knew it was an idea that had enormous promise. And some of the people involved in this enterprise had been working with me for years on educational matters when I was the Governor of Arkansas.

I also knew that if Minnesota was doing it, there was a pretty good chance it was a good idea, since the State already had some of the best performing schools in the United States. And I think the State and this community deserve a lot of credit for the general direction of education reform and rising test scores. Minnesota really is about to become Lake Wobegon, where all the children are above average. *[Laughter]* And that's good for you. Good for you.

I'm here today because I want all of America to know about you, and through you, to under-

stand what might be done in other communities with the charter school movement, to give all of our children the education they need and the education our country needs for them to have in a 21st century information economy.

This is a good time for us to be doing this. Our economy is in the best shape it's ever been. We have been working for 20 years on school reform; no one can claim anymore they don't know what works. We now have enough evidence that the charter school movement works if it's done right, as it has been done here. And we have the largest and most diverse student body in our history, which means there are more different kinds of people that may learn in different ways and have different personal needs, but they all need—I will say again—a certain high level of educational attainment.

The strategy that clearly works is accountability for high standards, with a lot of personal attention and clear support for the education mission of every school. We've tried to support that now for 7 years. The Vice President and I have supported everything from increasing Head Start to smaller classes in the early grades, to funds to help all of our States and school districts set high standards and systems for implementing accountability for those standards, to opening up the doors of college to more Americans.

Here in St. Paul, our movement to put 100,000 teachers on the streets—in our schools, I mean—has led, I think, to 23 more teachers being hired. And here in this city the average class size in the early grades is 18. If that were true in every place in America, the children would be learning, and all of our third graders would be able to read. More of them would stay in school; fewer of them would drop out; more of them would do well. So I want to congratulate you on making good use of that, as well.

We've also tried to make sure all of our schools were wired to the Internet. We're going to do a little work on the Internet later this morning. When the Vice President and I started and we got the so-called E-rate passed in Congress, which allows lower income schools to get subsidies to be wired and to use the Internet, to access it, there were only 16 percent of the schools and 3 percent of the classrooms connected. Today, 95 percent of the schools and

almost 75 percent of the classrooms are connected. And I think by the end of this year, certainly some time next year, we will have every classroom in America, certainly every school, connected, except those that are literally too old and decrepit to be wired. And unfortunately, there are some, and I've been out on another crusade to try to build new school facilities and have the Federal Government help in that regard, too.

But we've come a long way. And yet, we know that there are still schools which aren't performing as they should. Even though test scores are up, even though college-going is up, we know that there are schools which aren't performing. And I wanted to come here today because of what you've done, because you've proved that charter schools were a good idea.

As I said, when I started running for President, there was a grand total of one charter school—you. You were it. Now there are over 1,700 in America. And we have invested almost half a billion dollars since 1994 to help communities start charter schools. That's why there are over 1,700, and I'm proud of that.

And this is actually National Charter School Week, which is nice for me to be here by accident in this week. And I can say that—you know, my goal was to at least fund 3,000 or more by the time I left office. And I believe we are going to meet that goal, and one of the reasons is that you have set such a good example.

Now, what I want to talk about today is how the charter schools work a little—I want to say a little about that. And then I want to answer—if you'll forgive me for doing it, since you don't have this problem—I want to answer some of the critics of the charter school movements who say that not all the schools have worked.

Schools like City Academy, as I said, have the flexibility to reach out to students who may have had trouble in ordinary school experiences. At the same time, very often we see charter schools provide an even greater atmosphere of competition that induces kids to work harder and harder to learn. Studies show that charter schools are at least as racially and economically diverse as the public schools, generally. And here in Minnesota, they're more diverse than average schools.

Surveys show the vast majority of parents with children in our 1,700 charter schools think their children are doing better academically in those

schools than they were in their previous schools. There are long waiting lists to get in most charter schools all across the United States.

Now, does that mean every charter school is a stunning success? No. But I don't think that anyone can cite any endeavor of life where everybody is doing a great job. The idea behind the charter schools was never that they would all be perfect, but that because they were unlike traditional schools—they had to be created with a charter and a mission that had to be fulfilled—if they were not successful in that mission, they could be shut down or changed or the children could go somewhere else, and so that they would be under a lot more—pressure may be the wrong word, but the environment would be very different—that if they didn't work, the kids wouldn't be stuck there forever, that there would always be other options, and that they themselves could be dramatically transformed.

Now, the one problem we have had is that not every State has had the right kind of accountability for the charter schools. Some States have laws that are so loose that no matter whether the charter schools are doing their jobs or not, they just get to stay open, and they become like another bureaucracy. Unfortunately, I think even worse, some States have laws that are so restrictive it's almost impossible to open a charter school in the first place.

So the second point I want to make to the people, especially to the press folks that are traveling with us who have to report this to the country, is that not only has this first charter school in America, City Academy, done great, but Minnesota's law is right. You basically have struck the right balance. You have encouraged the growth of charter schools, but you do hold charter schools responsible for results. That's what every State in the country ought to do.

And I think, indeed, we should build the level of accountability you find here in the charter school system into all the schools in our system. That's what I'm trying to get Congress to do. Bruce and I have been working for a couple of years on an educational accountability act, which basically would invest more money in what we know works and stop investing money in what we know doesn't work—the kind of direction taken not only by the charter schools but by this State in terms of standards, accountability, not having social promotion but not

blaming kids for the failure of the system, permitting after-school, summer school programs, and real support for people like you.

Unfortunately, this week the Congress is—the majority is trying to pass legislation that neither puts more money or more accountability into the system. But I'm still hopeful that we'll be able to pass a good bill that really works before we go home.

Let me finally say that there are some people who criticize charter schools by saying that even though they are public schools, they amount to draining money away from other public schools. That's just not true. You would be in school somewhere. And if you were, whether your school was doing an effective job or not, the tax money would be going there. The charter school movement, if it works, can help to save public education in this country by proving that excellence can be provided to all children from all backgrounds, no matter what experiences they bring to the school in the first place. That's what this whole thing is about.

My goal is to get more money and more people involved in the charter schools movement, to break down the walls of resistance among all the educators to it, and to get community people all over the country more aware of it. Today we are going to release about \$137 million in grants to support new and existing charter schools in 31 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. I am going to ask the Secretary of Education today to develop guidelines for employers and faith-based groups so that they will know how they can be actively involved in supporting the charter school movement.

While charter schools have to be nonsectarian, there is a role, a positive role, that faith-based groups can play. And employers, we find around America, increasingly are willing to provide space and other resources to help charter schools get started. In nearby Rockford, Minnesota, for instance, there is the Skills for Tomorrow School, sponsored jointly by the Teamsters Union and the Business Partnership Union, corporate, and small business leaders have helped to develop the school. They also provide students with internships and take part

in judging whether they have met their academic graduation requirements to ensure that they have the skills they need to succeed. I think the guidelines I'm calling for today will get more businesses and more faith-based groups involved in the charter school movement.

We have learned now for 7 years that charter schools will work if you have investment and accountability, and if you make them less bureaucratic and more mission oriented. I'm very proud of the fact that in our administration the Secretary of Education has reduced the regulatory burden on local schools and States in administering Federal aid by about two-thirds, while we have doubled the investment in education for our schools.

And I'm very proud of the fact that long ago, even though I wasn't given the privilege of coming to this school, I heard about Milo; I heard about the City Academy; I heard about the charter schools movement. I talked to Joe Nathan; I talked to Ember about it, and a number of other people. And I ran for President in 1992 pledging that if the people voted for me, we would have more of these schools. And over 1,700 schools later, thanks to your example, my commitment, I think, has been fulfilled and American education has been advanced. I only hope that my presence here today will help to get us to 3,000 and will help to get us to the point in America where every school operates like a charter school.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:45 a.m. in the gymnasium. In his remarks, he referred to Tomas Gonzalez, 1994 graduate, who introduced the President, and Milo Cutter, founder and director, City Academy; Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk of Minnesota; Mayor Norm Coleman of St. Paul; Christine Jax, commissioner, Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning; Patricia Harvey, superintendent, St. Paul School District No. 625; Minnesota Senate Minority Leader Roger D. Moe; former Minnesota Attorney General Hubert (Skip) Humphrey III; and Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Alan Page. The National Charter Schools Week proclamation of April 28 is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.