

Remarks at the Swearing-In Ceremony for Roderick R. Paige as Secretary of Education

January 24, 2001

Thank you very much. Mr. Vice President, thank you very much; Dr. Paige, family members. I look out and see so many Members from the United States Senate. Mr. Chairman, thank you for coming. Senator Kennedy, I appreciate you being here, as well. I don't want to skip anybody, but the reason I mention those two, they happen to be the chairman and ranking minority of the Education Committee. I see Members from the House who are here. Thank you all for coming, as well, of course, Senator Hutchison, from the home State of Dr. Paige and the President—[laughter]—John Culberson from the district which represents Houston. So, thank you for coming. I am honored you are here.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to witness the swearing-in of a man who will help us see important reforms for education become reality.

The Vice President and I were so pleased to be invited and are pleased to be here in this important building. It is an important moment, and we certainly were not going to miss it. I wanted to see the beginning of a new era in public education.

Dr. Paige and I share a basic commitment: We will work to bring excellence to all public schools all across America. I picked a really good man to run this Department, a man of integrity, a man of common sense, a down-to-earth man who knows how to get the job done.

My administration has no greater priority than education, and Dr. Paige and I share that urgency. And there's no greater champion of reform than the man I am about to witness be sworn in as the Secretary of Education.

Every problem now facing our Nation's public schools Dr. Paige faced as superintendent of the Houston Independent

School District: children unable to read at basic levels; falling scores in science and math; problems with discipline and order. Dr. Paige answered those challenges with the spirit we must now bring to all our schools and all our districts in every State.

He did not tolerate indifference or mediocrity. He demanded the highest standards of students in schools, and people rose to the challenge. He proved that poverty does not need to be a barrier to achievement. He stressed reading as the key to all learning, and he measured progress, holding schools accountable for results. As Dr. Paige takes his new assignment, Houston is now a city proud of its schools and a city more hopeful for its children.

Rod Paige gained his passion for education from his own background. His mother was a librarian, and his dad was a school principal. His three sisters have dedicated their careers to teaching and education. And we welcome them to this ceremony today.

In his distinguished career, Rod Paige has seen firsthand what works. He has not just talked about education reform; he's practiced it. And that's why I picked him. He has shown an ability to reach across party lines, to cross old divisions for the sake of our children. I value all these qualities, and our country needs them.

We have great and urgent work to do. I'm honored to have this good man to be our partner in reform.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:24 p.m. in the Barnard Auditorium at the Department of Education. In his remarks, he referred to Senator James M. Jeffords, chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; and Representative John

Culberson, newly elected to Texas' Seventh Congressional District. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Paige.

Remarks at Merritt Extended Elementary School January 25, 2001

It's always a good sign when the principal gets a standing ovation—[*laughter*—from teachers and parents. Having spent some quality time with you, I now understand why.

First, Mr. Superintendent, thank you very much. Your reputation is a strong one because you believe every child can learn and are willing to work hard and make the tough decisions to make sure every child does learn in the District. Mr. Superintendent, thanks for coming.

I am so pleased and honored that the chairman of the Senate Education Committee and the ranking minority leader, Senator Jeffords and Senator Kennedy, are here; Chairman Boehner, Representative Miller came as well. You all did not have to come. And for you to come is not only a great honor for this school, but Laura and I really appreciate it.

I'm also pleased the First Lady is here. I always used to say, you can always judge the nature of a man by the company he keeps. [*Laughter*] And I keep pretty darn good company—[*laughter*—particularly when it comes to children and reading and education. She is a former public school librarian who loves children, who loves books, and has got the ability to combine the two. And I love her.

Dr. Shannon, thanks for coming. Those of us who have been involved with public education know this irrefutable fact, that the quality of a school depends on the quality of a principal; that when you find a good principal, the CEO of a school, you'll find a school that achieves what we all want: every child learning.

And there are some basic principles involved. One is to have leadership, not only at the district level but at the school level, set the highest of high standards. Leaders that understand that every child can learn and refuse to accept excuses when they don't. Dr. Shannon believes that way. She asked a question, "Why aren't our children achieving?" And when they begin to achieve, she raises the bar. That's what a leader does.

Secondly, and the reason we've come to Merritt, besides getting out of the White House—[*laughter*—is to herald what happens inside the walls here. And what happens here is there is a strong sense of accountability, which means there is a strong sense of the possible. Accountability is so important. And by accountability I mean testing children to determine whether or not children are learning. I believe it's the cornerstone of reform. I believe it's the essence of excellence in education, and I believe it's important to do so, to test every year, to make sure children are not left behind.

I worry about a system that doesn't test, because I ask the question, like Dr. Shannon asked the question, "How do you know if you don't?" I worry about a system that periodically tests, because one year you may test, and everything is fine. In 4 years, you measure again, and all of a sudden something isn't fine, and you've missed 4 years of opportunity to make sure a child doesn't slip behind.

Accountability is important for students. It's important for—and I know students don't like to take tests, and I'm confident the parents here heard the same thing