

it might not have—is bright for everybody in America, as I hoped. I’m worried that the education system in some places isn’t working, concerned about a military that—the morale in the military wasn’t high enough. I think we need to have a strong military to keep the peace. So I had some reasons for running, and now I’m working to achieve them.

One of the reasons I’ve come to your school is to be able to talk about education. I’m also talking about a budget plan. One of the things a President does is submit a budget to Congress—“Here’s where we ought to spend money, here’s where we ought to”—and if you have any money left over, I’m arguing we ought to give it back to the people who pay taxes, like the teacher right here.

Now, one other thing my wife is going to do, by the way, is she’s going to go around the country encouraging people such as yourself to think about being a teacher when you get older. There’s nothing more important than being a teacher. So as you start to think about your ambitions and your possible careers when you get out of college, think about being a teacher. It’s a very important profession.

The White House

Student. What is it like being President and living in the White House?

The President. It’s a big honor. It’s a big honor, as I’m sure you can imagine. It’s a very exciting job. The White House is a majestic place. It’s like a museum in many ways, and we’re, of course, now turning parts of the White House into our home. And Laura and I are the proud par-

ents of 19-year-old twin daughters, but they go to college so we don’t see much of them anymore. But we do have two dogs and a cat living with us. And so all five of us are adjusting to our new home. But it’s an honor.

And I hope some day you’ll come up to Washington and tour the White House, and you’ll get to see where we live. It’s a big honor.

Sam Houston Elementary School

Student. What school did you go to when you were our age?

The President. Sam Houston Elementary School in Midland, Texas. I was raised—you know where Texas is, of course. Most people in Arkansas know where Texas is, and all the people in Texas know where Arkansas is. Anyway, it’s the State right south of here. But I lived in the western part of the State. Many people in Arkansas have got kinfolks generally in east Texas, and I lived out in west Texas. That’s where I lived. And so I went to a place called Sam Houston Elementary School.

And I had no idea when I was your age that I would run for President of the United States. I, frankly, thought that what I wanted to be at the time is, I wanted to be a baseball player just like a guy named Willie Mays. He was my favorite player growing up. Then I realized I wasn’t a very good hitter, so I wasn’t going to be like Willie Mays.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:58 a.m. in classroom 15. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks at a Leadership Forum in North Little Rock March 1, 2001

The President. Well, thank you very much, Kaye. First, a good school depends

upon the leadership of a good principal, and it didn’t take me long to recognize,

one, this is a good school, and two, Kaye Lowe is a good principal.

I want to thank our panelists for coming. It's—I really love going to schools and seeing the enthusiasm of the teachers and the bright eyes of the students. That certainly was the case here today.

Before I begin, I want to thank the leadership of the State of Arkansas for coming: two fine United States Senators, Senator Hutchinson and Senator Lincoln. I want to thank Vic Snyder for being here, as well.

Governor, I've got a message for you—and Lieutenant Governor. You requested that the FEMA look at the ability—possibility of the Government funding 100 percent of the costs of the debris cleanup here as a result of those ice storms that hit Arkansas. Today, sir, I've got a letter for you funding—to provide 100 percent funding from the Federal Government for the State of Arkansas.

I've got also a—well, a very positive budget message, too, for the people of Arkansas. First, it starts with setting priorities. I want to spend a little time, and then I promise to let other people talk. But it's important for America to hear that the budget I submitted is one that is a realistic and reasonable budget, one that sets priorities.

One thing that our governments must do is set priorities. Without priorities, there is haphazard spending. The job of a President is to set clear priorities. A priority of mine is public education. It was a priority of mine as the Governor of the State of Texas. It is a priority of mine as the President. I understand, however, that even though it is a priority, that does not mean Washington, DC, should run public schools. And so I look forward to working with Members of the Congress to pass power out of Washington to provide flexibility so local jurisdictions can help design the strategies necessary to make sure that every child in America gets educated.

Secondly, we are spending more money, and that's important. However, there needs

to be a results-oriented approach to the expenditure of money, whether it be Federal money, State money, or local money. The cornerstone for reform, the whole concept of making sure no child gets left behind, rests upon strong accountability systems.

One reason we came to this school is because this is a school that's not afraid to measure. It's a school, by the way, that not only measures but does not view a measurement system as a way to punish somebody. They view a measurement system as a way to diagnose problems early and correct them early, so that no child is left behind.

And so we'll have a wide-ranging discussion here about education. And it's an important discussion to have. But I want to put it in the context of an overall budget.

Part of the priorities of a budget is to make sure we can keep the peace, so I have prioritized paying our soldiers more money in order to boost morale. I have prioritized setting aside all the money designed for Social Security to only be spent on Social Security. I'm confident that both Republicans and Democrats will hear that cry, that the days of using Social Security monies to pay other programs has ended. The Medicare budget doubles. And that's important, but we also have got to have Medicare reform so that seniors have got options from which to choose. All options will include prescription drugs.

So the budget sets priorities. Medicare is a priority. Social Security is a priority. Education is a priority. The defense of our people are priorities. Everybody else is going to have different priorities; trust me. I heard some last night from the able Senator. But that's how the system works. My job is to set clear priorities, and I have done so.

A second priority is to pay down debt. There's a lot of discussion about debt at the national level, and we ought to pay down debt. This budget pays down \$2 trillion of debt. Now people say, "Why don't

you pay down more?” Well, it doesn’t make any sense to pay off bonds before they retire, before they come due. It’s a reasonable approach; it makes eminent sense to do it this way.

We also have got money set aside for contingencies. There’s a trillion dollars over 10 years for contingencies. That’s a smart thing to do, and we’ve done that. A contingency—somebody says, “What do you mean by contingencies?” Well, emergencies are contingencies. We may have another bad situation for our agricultural sector, in which case we need contingency money. And so there’s a trillion set aside for contingencies.

And so we’ve set priorities. And we’ll argue about whether or not the priorities are the right priorities. Some of them are going to say up there, “Well, you know, he didn’t put enough in for education,” or “He didn’t put enough in for the military, didn’t put enough in for here or there.” Those are sometimes—the people who aren’t responsible for viewing the budget in its entirety. And that’s okay. Everybody’s entitled to an opinion, and there’s a lot of them in Washington.

But I just want to assure you that the budget I submitted, it sets priorities, pays down debt, has a contingency fund, and there is still money left over. And I’m going to argue vociferously, any time anybody will listen, that at this point in our Nation’s history, the wise thing to do with that money is to remember who paid it in the first place and let the payers keep the money.

I believe that tax relief ought to go to everybody who pays taxes. I don’t like the idea of the Federal Government saying, “Well, we’re going to pick and choose who the winners are. You’re targeted in, and you’re targeted out.” To me that is not fair, and that’s not the right way to approach tax relief. If you pay taxes, you ought to get relief. I do agree with the critics who believe that the people at the bottom end of the economic ladder ought

to get the highest percentage of relief. And my plan does that. It cuts all taxes for everybody. We drop all rates, including the bottom rate from 15 percent to 10 percent, and increase the child credit from \$500 to \$1,000 per child. We lessen the harsh effects of the marriage penalty, and we eliminate the death tax. That’s the basic plan.

Stephen Benson is here, a parent of two and proud husband of Shelia, for a reason, because he’s a taxpayer. He pays \$4,620 in Federal income taxes. Under this plan, in which everybody who pays taxes will get relief, he saves \$1,710. That’s above the national average for a family of four, which is 1,600.

Now you will hear people say, “Well, that’s not much money.” Well, that’s a lot of money if you’re paying higher energy bills, and folks who work across America are paying higher energy bills. It’s a lot of money if you’ve got consumer debt. And there’s a lot of discussion about national debt, and there should be. And as I mentioned, we’re doing the best we can to pay \$2 trillion of national debt. But Washington, DC, folks, needs to understand, there’s a lot of people who have got consumer debt, as well. And the idea of substantial tax relief after we meet priorities will help people like the Bensons manage their own debt. It’s one thing to be focused on the national balance sheet. The President needs and the Congress needs to pay attention to the people’s individual balance sheets, and that’s exactly what this tax relief plan does.

So I appreciate so very much the opportunity to not only make the case for education reform. And this school gets it. And evidently you get it, too, Governor, because the idea of insisting upon accountability as the cornerstone for reform makes eminent sense. We’ll argue about the remedies for failure, we’ll argue about what the consequences for failure are, but the truth of

the matter is, the whole reform system begins by measuring, by holding people accountable, by holding up success so that we know whether or not the reading curriculum that has been put in place here works. The principal assures me it does, and the reason she's able to say so with certainty is because you measure. And therefore, another school that may have trouble cheating—treating their children how to read will be able to say, “Well, let's see how they do it here.” We can prove that it works.

And so thanks for giving me a chance to come and also talk about the budget. It's going to be on people's minds for a while, until it gets passed. I will assure you, I'm going to try and keep it on people's minds.

[At this point, the forum proceeded.]

The President. I appreciate that. There's a woman—a reading czarina in Houston named Phyllis Hunter. She said one of the most profound thoughts of anybody in recent history, I think. She said, “Reading is the new civil right.” That's a pretty powerful statement. And it sounds like you all are right on track here. I want to thank you very much for what you're doing.

I also want a—another piece of public policy I'm going to work with the Congress on is to make sure that Head Start is—incorporates a reading curriculum that will do precisely what you said, that will teach—give children the necessary tools to become good readers when they make it into K or first grade.

Thank you very much for what you're doing here.

[The forum continued.]

Arkansas Department of Education Director Raymond Simon. Mr. President, one thing that I worry about on your program is the fact that it's based on common sense. [Laughter] So I think you're in for a hard road.

The President. You may be right. [Laughter]

Mr. Simon. But that having been said, the commonsense approach, we believe, mirrors exactly what we're about in Arkansas, flexibility at the local level. We've insisted in our State, through an initiative called Smart Start, which you may have heard of—

The President. I have heard of that.

Mr. Simon. Our K–4 initiative and Smart Step that we've advanced in the fifth through the eighth grade, we've made standards and accountability non-negotiable. But we have made negotiable how the schools get there.

Your program does exactly that. I credit you, and I applaud you for your interest in parents and strengthening the family, in character education. Our teachers often-times feel unsupported at that level, and your programs are going to help them get that support they need.

The President. Thank you.

Mr. Simon. We do believe that flexibility in spending is almost as important as more money. Certainly, we can use additional funds, but more important to us is flexibility. We've been able to do much with Smart Start in our State, not with huge amounts of money but with refocusing on what's important.

The President. You bet. Well, I appreciate that. I want you all to know that when we talk about accountability in Washington, at least when I do, the Federal Government will not design and administer a national test. The people of Arkansas are plenty capable about designing your own test and your own accountability system.

We'll hear the debates, and I can already hear them already, starting on the floor of the House and the Senate about how Washington, DC, insisting that schools measure in return for money will mean that it's going to undermine local control of schools. As they say in Arkansas, that is hogwash. [Laughter] That's not reality—

that's not reality. It's just like saying, "Accountability systems are racist." What's racist is not to have an accountability system, because what generally happens is, inner-city kids just get moved through. It's so much easier to quit on a child, so much easier. And what accountability systems do, designed at the local level, they say, "We're not going to leave any child behind, because we're going to measure early. And when we find failure, we're going to do something about it. We're not going to accept failure in American schools."

And so thank you very much for your comments. And guess what, common sense will prevail. [Laughter]

Principal Kaye Lowe. Mr. Benson, we'd like to hear from you as a parent.

Stephen Benson. Well, I was really excited about the tax cut.

The President. Say that again, Mr. Benson, as loud as you can. [Laughter]

Mr. Benson. Well, that money that I save—my priority is education for my children. I was going to put that money toward education, but I could put it towards something else because I know here at Lakewood Elementary, Ms. Lowe and her staff are doing great things to make sure my son has a quality education. And with the spending that you are proposing for the school, I'm just excited to see what Ms. Lowe and her staff has in store for my son for a quality education.

And as far as testing and standards, I have to agree with you wholeheartedly on that. My daughter and I have a conference once a week to measure her standard at her school in North Little Rock High School.

The President. Oh really? I was there.

Mr. Benson. So we emphasize standards, making sure we stay on the right level in our household.

The President. Well, that's great.

Mr. Benson. I'm really excited about all that you're doing.

The President. Thank you, sir. One thing about measuring—what you said just trig-

gered me. You have meetings with the school officials, based upon accountability. It is so important for us to not only measure but, to use a fancy word, disaggregate results, so that we're able to begin to individualize the systems around the country.

And that's going to be an incredibly important component of the reform, that we say each child matters and therefore the accountability systems must reflect the performance of each child, not kind of groups, collections of children. And the systems will then begin to emerge to individualize education.

Today we went to a computer lab, where the reading programs were constantly adjusting based upon the skill level of the participant on the computer. It's the fore-runner of the individualization of education, the likes of which a lot of us have not imagined here before. It begins with an accountability system that measures on a per-child basis, so when we get up to Washington, we cannot let the whole concept of accountability be undermined by not—by a system that does not measure on an individual child basis. And that's exactly what I'm going to insist happens.

[The forum continued.]

The President. You know, there's a lot of debate about English as a second language programs. And my attitude—obviously in the State of Texas we have a lot of people whose parents don't speak English as a first language. And my attitude was this: First of all, in our Nation, we must support what's called English Plus—English is the language of the country, plus we respect other languages; secondly, that the best way to determine whether bilingual programs or English second language programs are working is to measure.

There's a huge debate about immersion versus programs as *puentes para Ingles*—bridges to English. And the best way to determine what works is to say, here is the goal, which is English proficiency, and let's measure the systems that work. That

helps take the politics out of the debate about teaching children English. The goal is English; that's how people are going to get ahead in America. And the best way to approach the subject is to say, let's measure; let's be rational about how we approach these programs. And I appreciate you're—where were you raised in Texas?

Teacher Maria Touchstone. I was raised in Galena Park, right outside of Houston.

The President. Yes, the Fighting Yellow Jackets.

Ms. Touchstone. Yes. [Laughter]

[The forum continued.]

The President. Well, I appreciate that. The superintendent's right, that the reading initiative ought to help and make sure kids get to the appropriate level early in their careers. I will urge Congress to provide flexibility to States to be able to use some of the prescriptive Federal dollars to apply to IDEA, if that's what the State chooses to do.

There's \$1.6 billion of so-called construction money, the rules of which have not been written. I think one of the things that would make sense is to increase the amount of that money from 25 percent to 100 percent, to allow the States to use the IDEA—that money for IDEA, if that is what's best in the interest of the budget of the State.

I know the Congress sometimes doesn't like to provide flexibility for folks at the State level. But here is a good way—now, it's going to be hard to achieve huge funding for IDEA. But I—and one way to do

so is to take some of the prescriptive programs and allow flexibility at the State level. And I'm going to work with Congress, hopefully that they'll see the wisdom of that way, and hear—and by the way, the more money that goes into IDEA, the more local property tax money is freed up to meet specific construction needs, if need be.

And so I think one of the ways to try to get the number up toward the 40 percent that was promised by the Federal Government years ago, is to be—is to have a commonsense approach, Raymond, and to give flexibility—well, I appreciate that, Jim. The reading program will help. It will help make sure the children get a good start on their education early. And so will the Head Start program, and the Head Start initiative.

Principal Lowe. Mr. President, I'm sad to say that we're out of time. But again, I want to thank you so much for coming to Lakewood Elementary, and discussing—

The President. It's a huge honor to be here. Thank you all for being here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:40 a.m. in the cafetorium at Lakewood Elementary School. In his remarks, he referred to Representative Vic Snyder; Gov. Mike Huckabee and Lt. Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller of Arkansas; and James Smith, school superintendent, North Little Rock School District. The President also referred to IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Remarks at Fernbank Museum of Natural History in Atlanta, Georgia March 1, 2001

The President. Thank you very much. I'm glad I came to Georgia.

Thanks so much for that warm welcome, Vernon. It's great to be here in De Kalb County. It is great to be introduced by

one of the rising stars in De Kalb County, one of the rising stars in the State of Georgia. Vernon Jones is a good man—he's a good man. And I'm proud—I'm proud to have been introduced by him.