

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at Griegos Elementary School in Albuquerque

August 15, 2001

The President. Thank you for the warm greeting. It's an honor to be here on the first day of school. I can remember—I think I can still remember the excitement I felt when I was—the first day of school as a first-grader at Sam Houston Elementary School in Midland, Texas. At least I felt—I felt the energy of the kids, and I kind of could relate to it. And I want to thank you for giving me a chance to come.

I want you to know that the idea of coming here was Heather Wilson's. We were sitting around the Cabinet Room at the—right outside the Oval Office, and she said, "I understand you're thinking about coming to New Mexico." I said, "You bet. I used to spend a lot of time there when I was living in Midland, Texas. I think that's exactly where I intend to go during my stay out of Washington." She said, "Well, if you come to Albuquerque, you better make sure you go to a school, and I've got a good one in mind." And I said, "Yes, ma'am." [Laughter] Here I am. It shows what kind of influence she has as a Congressperson representing the great folks of Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I want to thank Heather for her service and for her recommendation.

I'm also really thrilled to be here with the two United States Senators from the State of New Mexico, Pete Domenici and Jeff Bingaman, both of them fine Americans. I want to thank the Lieutenant Governor, who is here. Lieutenant Governor Walter Bradley is representing the State officials, and I want to thank you for being here, Walter, as well.

I want to thank—I made a pretty darn good pick when I asked Rod Paige to come to Washington, DC, from Houston, Texas, to become the Secretary of Education. I picked Rod for a reason, and I think Brad Allison, the superintendent of schools here, will understand why. I wanted somebody who had been in the trenches of public schools, somebody who had been on the front line of insisting upon excellence for every single child, not somebody who had read it in a textbook or somebody who was

a theorist but a hands-on Secretary of Education who had cut his teeth in making sure that all children, not just a handful of children but every child in the school district, received a good education. And Rod Paige did just that as the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District. He's going to make a great Secretary of Education.

I was very impressed by Brad Allison's comments to me when I walked in. Sometimes people, when they meet the President, get a little tongue-tied. Not Brad. [Laughter] He said, "I want you to know, Mr. President, our school district is committed to two things, excellence in academics for every child and strong character education for every child." He understands that the two go hand in hand; that a complete child is one that not only learns how to read and write and add and subtract but a child who also learns the difference between right and wrong. And I applaud that holistic approach to education, Brad, and thank you for your leadership.

And I want to thank Eddie Lucero, too, the principal of the school. One of the things you learn when you spend a lot of time on public education, like I have done as the Governor of Texas and now doing as the President, that the quality of education in a particular school really depends upon the entrepreneurial spirit of the principal.

You've got a fine principal here. You know how I know? You've got an accountability system that tells us that's the case. We're not guessing in New Mexico whether or not children are learning to read. We know, because your State is bold enough to adapt a policy that says, show us whether or not the children are learning before any child gets left behind.

I just came from a second grade class. I want to thank Gloria—is she here, the second grade teacher? She is there. Gloria, thank you for your hospitality. Obviously, she has inherited on the first day of school a group of former first graders who were well-trained in reading. These kids are way beyond "The Hungry Caterpillar," let me put it to you that way. [Laughter] They read it better than the President could read it. [Laughter]

But I was very impressed. And I want to thank Gloria, but I also want to thank all the teachers, the teachers here in Albuquerque,

the teachers all across New Mexico and the country, for taking on a very important profession.

We can never thank our teachers enough. One of the things my wife is doing—and by the way, I'm sorry she's not here. She is—you would find her to be an articulate advocate for making sure every child learns to read. After all, she was the public school librarian when I married her. She also is going to spend a lot of time encouraging people to become teachers, encouraging those, for example, who have spent time in the military to take advantage of the Troops for Teachers program that we have worked with Pete and Jeff on to fund, to encourage people to get back into the classroom, to make sure that our kids have got the very best instruction possible.

I want to thank the teachers. I also want to thank the parents here. The truth of the matter is, you're the first teacher for every child. It's important for all of us who have been fortunate enough to be a mom or a dad to remember the most important job we will ever have is to love our children with all our hearts and all our souls. The most important job a mom or dad will ever have is to make sure your child is healthy, well treated, and well educated.

Good education starts in the living rooms of the citizens of this country. It starts with a mom or a dad saying, "You turn off the TV and practice reading." It means, get rid of the tube and get into the books. That's where it starts, and I know that's hard. After all, Laura and I raised twins, and they struggled to get that TV on. But we spent a lot of time reading to them early and insisting that they practice reading as they came up. And that's so important for a mom or a dad to realize that.

And after all, reading is the foundation of a good education. I'll never forget our friend, Rod, and my friend Phyllis Hunter of Houston, Texas. She said, "Reading is the new civil right." I want you to think about that concept. Reading is the new civil right. Reading is the capacity for some child whose parents may not speak English as a first language to be able to succeed in America. If your child

can read, your child can learn, and we want every child to learn.

The question I like to ask every child I visit in the classroom is, "Are you going to college?" In this great country, we expect every child, regardless of how he or she is raised, to go to college. That's a goal we want every child to have. And it starts with making sure every single child can read.

And so one of the things we've done is promoted a reading initiative based upon the science of reading, the sound science of what works. Laura recently hosted a big seminar in Washington, DC, bringing in folks who understand how to connect the brain to the words on the page. There's a science to reading. We found in my State that phonics needs to be an integral part of a reading curriculum to make sure every single child learns to read.

And one of the things we're doing, as we're working with Pete on our budget, is we're tripling the amount of dollars available for reading programs all around the country, to help districts develop diagnostic tools and determine what little children need help early, before it's too late; to make sure our teachers are properly trained in how to teach reading; and to make sure there's intervention programs available if a child needs extra help.

Reading is the whole basis for a good education system. And I want to applaud this school and your principals and your teachers for recognizing that and insisting that every child learn to read. I want you to understand, I said "every child." I didn't say "just a handful of children." I didn't say "only those whose parents may make a certain income." I mean every single child, because, you see, I believe—and I know many of you all believe—that every child can read in America.

We must challenge what I call the soft bigotry of low expectations. We must make sure the mindset that says certain children can't learn to read is eradicated all across America. See, it's so much easier to walk into a classroom of tough-to-educate children and say, "We'll just move you through. That's the easiest path." And guess who gets hurt the most when that happens? Guess who gets affected the most in a system that has no accountability as its cornerstone? It's the children, the so-called hard-to-educate, because it's easier to quit.

And one of the ways to make sure we never quit is, one, for the Federal Government to help, which we will do in reading programs. And by the way, I'm proud to announce, Mr. Superintendent, that Rod Paige and my administration has worked up a grant of \$6 million, a 3-year grant to the Albuquerque school system for the magnet school programs in your school districts.

No, we can help. And the cornerstone of the education bill that is still in the conference—and I'm confident the Members will work hard to get it out of conference so I can sign it, sooner rather than later—but one of the cornerstones of the bill says that we're going to hold people accountable for results.

I love coming into a school district where I hear the superintendent and the principals say, "Go ahead and measure us. We're confident that we've got the right curriculum. We're confident we've got the best teachers possible. We're confident that we're teaching our children the skills necessary to become productive citizens."

It's those school districts and States I get a little nervous about that say, "We don't want any accountability." You see, that, to me, seems like an excuse to mask failure. We can't mask failure anymore in America. Every child is too precious. And so the cornerstone says—of reform—says, the States and local jurisdictions will develop the accountability systems to let us know.

And we want to know. Moms and dads need to know. You need to know whether your children are learning to read, early. And if they're not, we've got to make sure they do. You need to know the results. We shouldn't fear accountability in America. We ought to welcome accountability. We're a results-oriented society, and when we find results that are satisfactory, we'll praise them. But when we find children trapped into schools that won't teach and won't change, we've got to insist upon something else.

I refuse to relent. I've heard all the arguments about accountability. "Oh, it's too much Government," they argue. Wait a minute. If we're spending taxpayers' money, if we're spending the hard-earned money of people—the money of people, hard-working people—we want to know, don't we?

Shouldn't we insist upon results if we're putting taxes into the coffers of the school system? Yes, of course.

And then you hear people say, "It's racist to test." Do you know what I think? I think it's racist not to test. I think it basically says—I think that attitude basically says, "Hey, some kids can't learn. So let's don't test. Let's don't find the truth." We need to know the truth, and when we find the truth, I can assure you what's going to happen: Where reform is needed, reform will happen.

There's nothing better to get parents involved in schools than to measure and report the results. There's nothing better than to have public report cards on accountability, so a mom or dad can know exactly where the school stands or where the children stand within a school.

A lot of us discussed the need to get parents more involved, and you bet, every teacher wants parents involved. They know it will make their job better. But when there's success, a parent will be involved to thank the teachers. And when we're not doing as well as we should be, the parents will be involved, because every child is precious in a parent's eyes.

We're making good progress around America. School districts like yours, Mr. Superintendent, are leading the way. You're showing them what can be done. I want to thank the school board members who are here. And I want to assure you, although we bring Washington rhetoric to Albuquerque, we believe in local control of schools in Washington. We believe in empowering the local people.

We know one size does not fit all when it comes to education. I can assure you that the Albuquerque school district is different from the Rhode Island school districts, for example. And therefore, we need to have more flexibility when it comes to Federal law. So one of the cornerstones of the reform package is going to be to consolidate Federal programs and entrust local people to make the right decisions on how to apply that money.

We're making good progress. We're making good progress challenging the status quo. And that's important, because every child is precious. And so, rather than ending my

speech here, what I thought I would do is maybe answer some questions, if you might have any, starting with the students, and if not the students, maybe the parents, and if not the parents, maybe the Senators. [Laughter] No, forget that. I'm on my vacation. I've been answering questions from Senators for—[laughter].

Anybody got any questions—any of the students? Yes, ma'am.

Medicare

Q. Are you going to try to do anything for the older people?

The President. Am I going to—I can't hear you very well.

Q. Are you going to try to do anything for the olderly (sic) people?

The President. The older people? "Olderly people?" [Laughter] Well, the first thing we're going to do is, we're going to make sure we've got a health care system that meets their needs. We're going to make sure that Medicare—[applause]. And we're beginning to work on a Medicare package that says to our seniors, our Nation has made you a promise, and we intend to keep the promise, that there needs to be a prescription drug benefit as a part of Medicare, and that there needs to be more options and more choices for our senior citizens to be able to design a health care program to meet their particular needs.

Medicare is old; it's antiquated; it's ancient. It is not responsive, and it needs to be fixed. And one of the dangers about fixing Medicare, it becomes what we call a hot political football. People try to use the issue to burn somebody who is trying to talk about Medicare. But I guess I must think I've got an asbestos suit on, because I'm going to talk about the issue until we get it fixed. It's an important issue to get it reformed, and I believe we can make some progress.

I met with both Republicans and Democrats on this issue, and there seems to be a desire and a will to make sure Medicare is responsive. And so I think that's the most important thing we can do pretty quickly for the "olderly." [Laughter]

Yes.

President's Experience as a Student

Q. We're you a good student in fifth grade?

The President. In fifth grade? [Laughter] I'm glad you qualified that for fifth grade. [Laughter] Yes, I was a good student in fifth grade. But I do want to remind you that I went back to my alma mater, which was Yale University, and I received an honorary degree. And I was giving—I gave a few remarks there, and I said, "To the honor students, I say congratulations. And to you C students, I say, you, too, can be President." [Laughter]

But I like to read. I liked to read when I was in the fifth grade, and I still like to read. I read a lot. And it's important to read. It's really important to pay attention to your moms and dads and your teachers who are all encouraging you to practice reading.

Yes.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. She's asked about the teacher shortage. There are some programs, targeted programs to try to recruit people. One is the Troops for Teachers program I mentioned, where we provide teacher-training money for people getting out of the military to get back in the classroom. That's a place where my wife is focusing to encourage those who may have had another career to get back in the classroom.

The truth of the matter is, most incentives, however, are developed at the State level. One of the things that people get a little mixed up on is, they insist upon local control of schools but expect the Federal Government to pay teachers, for example. That's not the Federal role. The good folks in New Mexico have got to figure out whether or not you want to pay your teachers more.

One of the most important pieces of legislation I signed as the Governor of Texas, we paid each teacher a \$3,000 increase in my third term as Governor, with the attempt to make sure we retained our teachers and kept our teachers in place. I notice they worked on some health insurance during the last legislative session. The States are responsible for making sure the teachers are well paid.

Now, the Federal Government, by giving maximum flexibility to monies coming back

to the State, will help States prioritize, will help States have extra money, for example, if we can have—let me put it this way. By having flexibility, it lets States set the priorities necessary. And if a priority in New Mexico is the recruitment and retention of teachers, flexibility will help you do that. And so there are some things we can do; there's some grant programs. But mainly, it's up to the States to recruit.

Now, one of the things that Laura can do, and I can do, as well, is encourage people who are trying to pick out a career to go to teacher college and to become a teacher. And so we're going to spend time doing that, as well. One of the things we've got to make sure of, however, is that our teacher colleges teach teachers how to teach, by using curriculum that works. And that's a very important part of—[*applause*].

And finally, let me say one other thing. The other thing we can do is—we've got teacher-training money in the budget, and one of the things that's so important for teachers is to feel like they've got the tools necessary to teach. And finally, one other thing we can do for retaining teachers is to make sure classrooms are safe. As a part of an initiative that I've talked about and that Congress worked on is that we've got a teacher and principal and school board liability protection in the education bill that says, you cannot be sued for enforcing reasonable standards of discipline in classrooms across America. And that's a very important part.

The First Lady

Q. Mr. President, thank you. Welcome to my alma mater. I graduated from this school 30 years ago.

The President. Did you make all A's in the fifth grade? [*Laughter*]

Q. All A's, yes, sir. Mr. President, I understand here at Griegos there's a vacancy for a librarian. Do you think that Mrs. Bush would be interested? [*Laughter*]

The President. I'll tell you something about Mrs. Bush, she is—she is doing a great job as the First Lady. She loves books; she loves children; and it's a perfect combination for her to have been a librarian. And one of the things she will do is spend a lot of time encouraging the formation of libraries

and making sure teachers learn—know how to teach, and making sure children learn how to read.

You know another area where we can do a better job of is making sure Head Start is an early learning initiative, that Head Start provides children just the basics, the basics of learning how to read, so that, when they come to Griegos Elementary School as kindergartners, they've got a good opportunity to accelerate.

One of the things we've done is, we've said we're going to have accountability programs, starting in the third grade. Well, we've got to focus early, to make sure that all students get close to the starting line at the same spot so that we don't disadvantage certain schools or children based upon the demographics. Head Start is a great place, and it's a wonderful program. It's a needed program, but it can do a better job of having an education component as a part of its curriculum.

Yes, sir.

Rio Rancho High School

Q. Hi, I'm Nicholas Connor, and I go to Rio Rancho High School. There are so many things I want to say and ask. Could you come to Rio Rancho High tomorrow? [*Laughter*]

The President. No. [*Laughter*] Thank you. But good luck to you. What grade are you going to be in?

Q. I'm going to be a sophomore.

The President. Sophomore, great. You got a driver's license yet?

Q. Permit.

The President. Permit—that's a frightening experience, isn't it? [*Laughter*]

Let me have one more question; then we've got to go. Yes, sir.

President's Early Work Experience

Q. What jobs did you have when you were in high school?

The President. In high school? Let me think about that; it was a long time ago. I actually worked on a ranch in Arizona. And I worked in a law firm, in a law library. I was a—lawyers read a lot of books, and my job was to go around and collect the books after they had read them and put them back in the library—[*laughter*]—a lot of heavy lifting. [*Laughter*]

But that's a good question. I think one of the things you ought to do when you go to high school is to see if you can't find a variety of work experiences. It's important to get as much experience as you can prior to entering what they call the real world.

If you want to be President, I would suggest you become a Governor—[laughter]—because Governors make decisions, and that's what Presidents do. A Governor has got to be somebody who knows how to listen to people, just like a President does, and then have the willingness to make a tough decision and stand by it.

And that's why it's such an honor to be the President. I like making decisions. But really, you know what I really like? I like being the President of the greatest Nation on the face of the Earth, because we've got such great people in America.

Thank you all for having me. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:05 p.m. in the gymnasium. In his remarks, he referred to Gloria Schatzinger, second grade teacher; and Phyllis Hunter, consultant, Texas Reading Initiative.

Remarks to the Hispano Chamber of Commerce in Albuquerque

August 15, 2001

Thank you very much. *Gracias por tu bienvenida*. Thank you, all. *Es un gran honor para me de esta con ustedes*—it's an honor to be here with you all. Thank you very much for your hospitality. *Sientese*. [Laughter] I appreciate so very much the hospitality. It's nice to come over from your neighboring State to New Mexico. I've always held New Mexico in high regard. It's such a beautiful land, full of decent and caring people, well-represented, I might add, in the United States Senate by my close friend Pete Domenici.

I know this is not a political event, but I can't believe anybody would dare challenge Pete. He's doing such a good job on behalf of the people of New Mexico.

I appreciate Jeff Bingaman, the other Senator from the State of New Mexico. I appreciate his service to the State. I look forward to working with Jeff, to have a coherent energy policy for the United States of America.

I appreciate Heather Wilson. She's a breath of fresh air in the United States Congress.

I want to thank my friend Joe Skeen for coming up from southeast New Mexico. I appreciate *el alcalde de Albuquerque*, the mayor, for being here, as well. But most of all, I want to thank the good folks of the Hispano Chamber. I want to thank Loretta and Phil Castillo for their hospitality. And I want to thank them for their vision. I want to thank them for understanding the importance of community and of the importance of small business in our society.

Archbishop, thank you very much for being here, as well.

You know, the role of Government is not to try to create wealth. The role of Government is to create an environment in which people can realize the American Dream. And part of the American Dream is to be able to own your own business, to be able to say, "I want to start my business. I want to nurture my business. I want to grow my business." It's the wonderful thing about America that if you've got an idea, it doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, that that experience ought to be available to everybody.

And so I think we're doing some things in Washington, DC, to make it easier for people to own their own small business. And by the way, it's incredibly important. As my friend Hector Barretto said, most of the new employment in America comes from small-business owners. Small business is the backbone—is the backbone of our economic system. And one of the pieces of incredibly good news about America is, the number of Latino businesses is increasingly dramatically. The fastest growing business sectors in many of our States is the Hispanic-owned businesses. That's good news for America. It's good news for neighborhoods all across our great country. I want to congratulate the entrepreneurs who are here today.

We're making good progress about making the environment more conducive for ownership, starting by cutting the taxes on the people who pay the bills. We didn't just cut the taxes on a few; we said, "If you pay taxes, you ought to get tax relief. We understand that our economy was slowing down, that it's not going the way we'd like it to. And one