

Our district is growing, and we need schools constructed soon.

Our teachers, students and staff need safe schools to work in for 7.5 hours a day.

The need for Federal funding is even greater now than ever before.

Those are some of the real challenges facing our schools, and you don't fix them by bashing educators; you fix them by making an investment in the things that we know work.

I want to turn to a few investments that we should be making in our final budget plan. It is our last chance this year to do the right thing for America's students. Let me start with making classrooms less crowded. We know our classrooms are overcrowded and we know that students can learn the basics, with fewer discipline problems, in less crowded classrooms.

Parents know it, students know it, teachers know it, and studies show it.

Two years ago, we made an investment in making classrooms less crowded. I am pleased to report that the investment is paying off for America's students. It is making a positive difference in their education. We gave local school districts the money to go out and hire more than 29,000 new qualified teachers for the early grades. And today, 1.7 million students are learning in less crowded classrooms.

Our goal is to hire 100,000 new teachers. You would think that with the success we have had so far, there would be no question that we would keep our commitment to reducing class size. But that is not the case in this Congress. Right now, there is no guarantee that schools across the country will have funding guaranteed to reduce classroom overcrowding. Some of my colleagues on the Republican side say we don't need to commit money for class size reduction. They say if schools want to hire teachers, let them take the money out of title VI funding.

Reducing overcrowding should not be done at the expense of something else. That money should be there—guaranteed to make a positive difference for students.

In this debate, two things have been forgotten. First, part of the Federal role is to help disadvantaged students. The class size program is set up to target funding to low-income schools. If you dump that program into a block grant, there is no guarantee that it will be focused toward disadvantaged students. Title I, homeless and migrant education programs are all targeted to ensure that disadvantaged students get the help they need. A block grant offers no guarantees.

The second point overlooked in this debate is the importance of accountability. Under a block grant, there is no guarantee this money will go to hire new teachers.

Block grants mean less accountability. Right now, we can show that money was spent and how it is making a difference. If the money is block granted, we have no idea if it is making classrooms less crowded. Today, every-

body is talking about accountability, and the best way to ensure accountability is to show that Federal dollars are being spent in a specific, targeted way to reach a specific goal. If we put Federal education funding into a block grant, there is no way to keep that money accountable. Class size is just one of the areas in which we need to invest.

Let me mention another: school construction and modernization. Today, too many students enter school buildings that are crumbling or that have major safety hazards. In fact, 7 million students attend schools with safety code violations, including the presence of asbestos, lead paint, or radon in ceilings or walls. Almost 16 million students in this country attend schools without proper heating, ventilation, or air-conditioning. And too many of our schools don't have the technological infrastructure to meet our students' needs. For example, in our poorest schools, only 39 percent of classrooms have Internet access. We need to pass legislation that will give local school districts the financial help they need to build new schools and to modernize old ones.

I want to turn to teacher quality. We can help ensure that every teacher in America is fully qualified and has the tools and the support to help our children reach their full potential. Today, there are thousands of world-class, high-quality teachers in our schools. They are professionals. They care deeply about the quality of our children's education, and any of us would be lucky to have our children learn from them. But the current system makes it harder and harder for teachers to really do their best. Instead of offering them the support they need to make a difference, the current system puts roadblocks in front of too many teachers.

Teachers and parents have told me that the main challenges are the three R's: recruiting great teachers, retaining great teachers, and rewarding great teachers.

We need to recruit young people into the teaching profession. We need effective, ongoing, professional development programs that are aligned with local standards and curricula. We need efforts to boost pay for great teachers and to raise respect for educators. In the closing weeks of the 106th session, we should be supporting efforts to improve teacher quality.

Finally, the subject of accountability. We should not accept defeat or give up on our Nation's schools. We need to identify schools that need extra help and turn those schools around.

It is late in the legislative process, and we are in a rush to end this year's session. Let's remember one thing. America's students didn't create this rush. I am standing here today and I will be fighting to make sure that our students are not penalized because this Senate failed to do its work. I know my

colleagues are eager to go home, but we still have time to do the right thing. We still have time to support the work that local educators, students, and parents are doing. The way to do it isn't to bash public schools but to put Federal dollars where they will help the most and to keep those dollars accountable. The way to do that is to invest in things that we know work, such as smaller classes, modern facilities, fully qualified teachers, and accountability. It is not too late to do the right thing.

Parents, teachers, and students across this country are counting on us to do our part as a responsible Federal partner. Let's not let them down.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ALLARD). Without objection, it is so ordered.

106TH CONGRESS

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I think the focus today, as we move toward the appropriations bills, is education. It has been a focus during this whole Congress. I saw some figures that we spent a total, in the 106th Congress, of 5 weeks talking about education. That is indicative, I believe, of the importance all citizens place on education. I don't think anyone would say education isn't a very high priority for everyone.

The question is, How is the role of the Federal Government best created? In my view, one of the important things is to have some assistance from the Federal Government, to have some financial assistance. We also are in a system where people move about and are educated in one place and work in another place. There has to be some continuity or accountability that each of us is educated enough to be able to be successful.

One of the most important issues is who makes the decisions with regard to individual school systems. I think the Republicans, working on this side of the aisle, have had a very strong agenda for education, returning control to the parents for sending dollars to the classroom, dollars to States and local school boards so they can make the decisions that are necessary to be made in that particular school, give families greater educational choice, support exceptional teachers, and focus on basic academics, stressing accountability.

I have always thought, as a member of the Wyoming legislature, we cannot have a good school system without the dollars. Dollars alone do not necessarily result in a good school system. There has to be some accountability as well.

Of course, on the Federal level, the needs in Chugwater, WY, are quite different from those in Pittsburgh. Many

things are that way. There needs to be flexibility; in one particular school, perhaps what is most needed is to build a new school or replace the old school; in another school, what is needed is computers, teacher training, or more academic materials. "One size fits all" does not work. Frankly, that has been the underlying difficulty in this entire debate.

The President of the United States will be here this afternoon pushing for his plan so bureaucrats in Washington can decide and dictate what the Federal dollars are spent for. On the other side of that argument, we have given more dollars to the budget than even the President asked for. We are saying those ought to offer flexibility so local people can decide the best use for the dollars, yet with accountability for the taxpayers' dollars.

The Democratic approach has been a series of mandates: 100,000 federally funded teachers, federally funded school construction, federally funded afterschool. All those are fine if that is the priority in your particular school district. However, we are not in the business of having a bureaucracy in Washington make those decisions.

There have been difficulties moving forward:

The Taxpayer Relief Act, vetoed by the President, over \$500 million in family tax relief—families could have used that money at any level to have supported schools;

Passing the Ed-Flex bill, with Federal requirements being waived if they are interfering with what they seek to do.

These are the items we are debating with regard to education.

We are, hopefully, near the end of this session. We will wind up next week. We have accomplished quite a number of things. Some people talk about a do-nothing Congress, which absolutely is not the case. The Republicans have balanced the budget, pushed forward and obtained the balanced budget in 1998, the first time since 1969 we have had a balanced budget. We saw that because of some restraints on spending, because of the flourishing economy bringing in more dollars. Nevertheless, it is the first time we have had enough dollars to balance the budget outside of Social Security dollars. We have changed the deficits to surpluses and lowered interest rates, paid down the debt \$360 billion over the past 3 years.

In addition to that, of course, at the same time, Republicans have lowered the tax burden over the next 5 years. The tax cuts will provide the average household with almost \$2,000 in tax relief. We enacted the \$500 child tax credit that keeps \$70 billion in the checking accounts for 25 million families. These are important things. We created the individual retirement accounts with IRAs to help families save more money, help people prepare for their own retirement, so that Social Security is a supplement, as it was designed to be.

The Republicans have stopped the raid on the Social Security trust fund and set aside Social Security funds so that they will be spent on Social Security and not borrowed and spent for other programs. We need to ensure that continues to be the case.

Welfare has been reformed and has helped Americans go back to work. In 1995, there were 13 million Americans on welfare. In 1996, there was reform, helping more than 6 million of those, nearly half, to be now employed—to be able to sustain themselves. That is really the purpose of Government programs. It is not to have a continuing source of relief but to provide an opportunity to help people help themselves, which not only is a good issue governmentally but, of course, individually it is something that is so important.

We strengthened the military. More needs to be done. We find ourselves in the situation where we have had more military deployments out of this country over the past 6 or 8 years than we have ever had in the past. We find ourselves, of course, in sort of a semipeaceful time but with a voluntary military, so we have to be able to compete somewhat with the private sector in pay so people will join. It is not only in the recruiting, of course, but the maintenance of people who have been trained so they will stay in the military. We have done that. We need to do more, of course.

We need to change the military. Our needs are different than they were 20 years ago. We are not going to see ourselves having to send 12 divisions with tanks somewhere. We are going to see ourselves with smaller, more flexible combat units moved quickly to a place with enough support to stay there for some time.

These are some of the things that continue to be important. I hope we continue to focus on them. Our job now, of course, is to get out about three or five more appropriations bills and fund those programs. I am a little discouraged at the amount of spending we have had this time. Much of that has come from pressure from that side of the aisle and the White House. They will not agree to appropriations bills unless they have all the things in them the President wants. He is entitled to do that. But this is one of the three units of Government, a separate unit. We ought to do those things we think are right and the President can do what he thinks is right. But I hope we do not get ourselves into a position where the President is deciding what we in the Congress do. That is not the system. We ought not be doing it that way.

I look forward to us moving forward, completing our work, and coming back with a new Congress, able to take a look at where we are going. I hope each of us, as Americans, gives some thought to where we would like to be, where we would like to see these various programs go—regardless of which you are looking at; whether you are

looking at education; whether you are looking at reregulation of electricity; whether you are looking at the military. One of the difficulties is we move forward many times and make decisions that impact those issues without having a very clear-cut image of where we want to go. It is a little like Alice in Wonderland where she was wandering around and no one was able to tell her anything. She finally saw the Cheshire cat. There was a fork in the road and she said, "Which one should I take?" The cat said, "Where are you going?" "I don't know," Alice replied. The cat said, "Then it doesn't make any difference which road you take."

That is true. So we need to come with an idea of what our goal or mission is, where we want to end up over a period of time in education, and what are the steps we can best take to ensure that happens. Regarding Social Security, where do we want to be in 20 years or 30 years? These people who are paying in 12.5 percent of their salaries into Social Security, are they going to have benefits 40 years from now when they are entitled to them? Not unless we make some changes.

The choices are fairly clear. You can raise taxes; people are not excited about that. You can cut benefits; that is probably not a good idea. One of the alternatives we are pursuing, and there may be others, is to take a portion of the Social Security dollars that have been paid in over time by younger people to make that decision for themselves—take a portion of that and have it invested on their behalf in their accounts in the private sector so the return, instead of being 2.5 percent, could be 5 percent or 6 percent.

People say: Well, look at the market now. Look at the market over time. The market over each 10-year period has grown fairly substantially.

So these are some of the things I hope we consider. I hope we consider them promptly so we are out next week.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, are we in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are in morning business.

Mr. KENNEDY. Is there a time limitation?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator has 31 minutes.

Mr. KENNEDY. I thank the Chair.

FOCUSING ON PRIORITIES

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, as we are coming into the final hours, the final days of the Senate session, there are still a number of measures which