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URGENT

DRAFT

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE CONFERENCE

This evening my observations will be informal and quite personal. I agreed to present "reflections," rather than a keynote speech, since we have already heard superb speeches at this Conference -- and there are more to come.

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During the past two and half years I have served as Commissioner of Education, and during this time I have felt richly rewarded. It's been an honor to be a part of this Administration. This time in Washington has been one of the most satisfying experiences of my life. I have been most grateful for the support I have received from

- o the President
- o the Secretary
- o from each of you.

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As I reflect on the subject of education in this country, I have great ambivalence.

Like Charles Dickens, I feel it is--

- o the worst of times, the best of times,
- o the spring of hope, the winter of despair.

During the past two years I have deepened my confidence in education, but I must confess that I have also deepened my concern. My confidence has grown because of the people I have met.

- o The chiefs, who are outstanding,
- o The administrators in the schools.

I've also gained great confidence because of the students and the teachers I have met.

Since 1977 I've visited dozens of classrooms from coast to coast and I've been reminded once again that teaching is one of the toughest assignments in the world.

Keeping 25 to 35 children attentive and well focused is not easy -- as any parent should clearly understand.

But to help each one move intellectually ahead is a task which is enormously complex. And I'm convinced we should give the classroom teachers of this country much more backing and support.

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Students also build my confidence. Of course I've been in schools with graffiti on the wall and with tension in the air.

It's also true that in some cities violence and vandalism have been an epidemic.

(Include data on crime and violence in schools.)

But that does not end the story.

For years I've met with students on campus after campus and I've been enormously impressed. Research reveals that many of our students are the most sophisticated in the world.

(Insert OECD data)

But it's not just a matter of knowledge; its sophistication, too. Just three weeks ago I met with junior and senior high school students in my office to talk about their education. That day-long session was one of the most rewarding I have had. Those students were bright, articulate, and demanding of themselves; and we do an enormous disservice to millions of our children by describing them as ignorant and hedonistic. They are in many ways as strong or stronger than the adults who criticize.

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I've been encouraged by my colleagues in OE. Federal service has its weaknesses to be sure. I've found the rigidity of personnel transactions a source of special irritation. But overall, the formality of the system is no greater than other structures -- a college faculty for example -- and we do a massive disservice to government in this country to refer to public employment in derisive terms and to make the label "bureaucrat" a term of ridicule.

I'm also encouraged by the renewed public interest in our schools. Polls reveal that while the confidence in schools has gone down, our belief in public education remains high. And most importantly we still have confidence in the particular school of which we are a part.

(Insert poll data)

It's especially encouraging that so many ordinary citizens want to help the public schools. In fact, volunteerism -- in many regions -- has become a landslide movement.

(get data on school volunteerism nationwide)

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Last year - while in Schnectady, N.Y. I saw an older man and a young boy in the Martin Luther King school library. When I asked what was going on, the man replied that he had recently retired from OE, and rather than meditate beside the lake he decided to use his brain and reading skill to help young students learn to read. He now tutors 5 hours every day and has recruited 35 other retirees to help.

Finally, my confidence in education has gone up because many schools are making solid academic gains.

- o Specifically, I believe the downward drift of test scores has been turned around. Schools are putting renewed emphasis on the fundamentals, especially in languages and mathematics.

(Get data)

- o This week we are signing an agreement with
and an unprecedented partner-
ship to promote the basic skills.

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I support this renewed commitment to the fundamentals, not out of reactionary inclinations, but simply because no student can succeed if he or she cannot read or write or speak effectively or accurately compute.

This Nation's commitment to public education is the most advanced and ambitious in the world. Because of this commitment this Nation leads the world, not because of ignorance but because of education.

- o And any talk of deschooling our society, or closing up our schools, or not funding public education
- o Is to reject one of the Nation's most essential social institutions.

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These are some of the reasons why I am confident about public education. But I am concerned as well. The most fundamental problem we now face is how to pay for public education.

- o In 1647 the Massachusetts Bay Colony has passed a law requiring every town of 50 or more citizens to have a schoolmaster to teach the children to read and write.
- o From that time on the trouble of this country has been local support for local schools.

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Clearly that pattern has now broken down. The joint push for local tax reduction and social equity have shifted school finance increasingly to the state, with Federal support for compensatory help.

(get data on states with 75% or more from state;
50% or more; several states where state support
is highest)

Many school districts are financially up against the wall, and I suspect the next 10 years will bring more turmoil as school districts all across the country are caught in the crisis of transition away from local tax support.

Most ominous are the moves in several states to destroy the very foundation of public education. It is my opinion that the so-called voucher plans would leave the Nation's schools in shambles. These schemes would withdraw direct school support and give money to the parents. The stability of the structure would be seriously eroded as students move from place to place.

(Mike Smith insert several arguments)

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The financing of public education must be reshaped, but the process must strengthen, not erode this Nation's commitment to the public schools.

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The high school system in this country also is of great concern. Frankly, I believe the so-called comprehensive high school is now largely obsolete. I also believe the years lockstep needs to be reshaped. If the basic school and the middle school are purposeful and effective I believe some specialization later on is possible.

The dropout rate is still a national disgrace. Even though attrition has decreased, ___ % of our high school students leave before they graduate -- and many do not return. Equally shocking is the performance of those who stay on to graduate.

(get data of the scores of high school grads--
from a sample state or district)

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I believe the high school is the single most unjust public education place, and it is urgently important that we develop a strategy to reform this institution and prepare students academically and also equip them for productive work. We ourselves have not been clear in making the high school purpose clear.

Third, I am most concerned about the gap between what we teach in school and what students need to know. Much of what goes on in school is relevant -- but much is not.

- o Our global interdependence has grown dramatically in recent years and yet our knowledge remains very, very small.

(Richard, get examples from my speeches elsewhere)

- o A whole new vocabulary has emerged -- one which relates to life itself, and yet for most of us it's still a foreign language. We are awash in a sea of ignorance.

During the Three Mile Island crisis we were told about

(insert technical terms about radiation levels etc.)

and most of us were in complete confusion.

In fact, if Three Mile Island told us anything at all, it told us how ignorant we are. And it reminded us, once again, that PR spokesmen are more concerned with "image" than with truth.

Archibald MacLeish, in his recent book Riders in the Sky described this world in which we seem to have created a world which we can neither fully comprehend or fully govern. We have, he said, begun "to see science as a kind of obelisk beyond our reach, beyond our understanding even; known, if it is known at all, through proxies who, like priests in other centuries, could not tell us what they know."

And he concludes by saying that heaven will put it "we no longer believe in man." The answer lies in education which focus not just on subjects, but on social purpose.

Dr. Rene Dubos, one of the world's greatest living scientists, said at an international convention of scientists that:

"We must not ask where science and technology are taking us, but rather how we can manage science and technology so that they can help us get where we want to go."

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Finally, the issue here is leadership. Those who are most concerned are most preoccupied. It's tragic that for many years the education issues have been defined not by education's advocates, but by critics.

Year after year the public is told what is wrong, and rarely told about what is right -- and we are at best defensive. Those who run the schools seem so caught up in confrontation that vision and leadership is lost.

Here I must underscore an essential point. Public respect for education must be earned. And if we do not have creative solutions to our problems, then it is inevitable that others will. And in spite of budget cuts I still believe our problem is not the lack of money, but the lack of ideas. Every study on what makes good schools has concluded it's the principal. And I'm convinced that the public will support proposals for reform that are strong and realistic.

This is, in fact, the spirit of this conference, and I am grateful you now come together to focus on the future of our schools. Leadership still makes the difference.

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Last year I introduced a tradition to underscore the centrality of leadership in education. I decided that once a year the Commissioner should recognize someone who has contributed outstandingly to our Nation's colleges and schools.

The first award was given to one of the Nation's most distinguished educators Dr. Bayard Mays -- the chairman of the Atlanta School Board.

Tonight I am delighted to announced that the Second American Education Award--which is given in honor of Mary McLeod Bethune -- will be awarded to the Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame.