

The President's Radio Address

February 20, 1999

Good morning. This weekend, Governors from all over our country are here in Washington to talk about the long-term challenges facing our Nation as we prepare to enter the 21st century. Of those challenges, none is more important than educating our children—all our children—to world-class standards. Today I want to talk about how we must work together at every level of government and in every community, to make sure our Nation's public schools are the best in the world.

For 6 years now, improving education has been one of our highest priorities. Even as we have held fast to fiscal discipline, replacing an age of crippling budget deficits with a new era of budget surpluses, we have nearly doubled our investment in education and training.

The balanced budget I sent to Washington this month strengthens that commitment to our children's education with even more resources to help States improve accountability, to build or modernize 6,000 schools,* to reduce class size in the early grades, to start more after-school programs, to connect every classroom and library to the Internet, and to finish the job of hiring 100,000 new highly trained teachers.

This is an education agenda for the 21st century. But with more children entering school than ever before and enrollments continuing to rise, we know we must draw on every resource we possess to strengthen and improve our public schools.

As both a former Governor and a parent, I know the greatest innovations in education do not start in Washington. They start in local schools and school districts, in community councils and parent-teacher groups. They start in States like North Carolina, where Governor Hunt has led the way to improve teacher quality, with performance assessment for new teachers and incentives for veteran teachers to become even more proficient and to become board-certified master teachers.

They start in Michigan, where Governor Engler is supporting greater accountability in schools by requiring school districts to send parent report cards on how well their schools are doing. They start in Delaware, where Governor Carper is putting an end to social promotion by insisting that students pass State tests before they move to next grades. They start in Pennsylvania, where Governor Ridge is improving school safety with effective discipline codes. They're starting in States like California, where Governor Davis has called on the State legislature to turn around failing schools with a new accountability plan.

As I have said many times, every problem in education in America has been solved somewhere, by somebody, in America. The trick is helping more communities to put those proven solutions to work in their own public schools. I believe the National Government has an obligation to help them do that.

That's why, in my State of the Union Address, I proposed an ambitious new agenda to invest more of our resources in what we know is working and to stop investing in what doesn't. My plan will help every school district to take five steps that are already working in schools around the country, steps advocated by teachers and principals and parents and students themselves: ending social promotion, but investing more money to help students with summer school and after-school programs, so we don't blame students when the system fails them; adopting and enforcing reasonable discipline codes; giving parents report cards on their children's schools and giving parents and children more choice of schools, with charter schools and more public school choice; turning around or shutting down the worst performing public schools; and ensuring that all new teachers are trained in the subject they'll be teaching.

Now, these steps are all based on proven experience. They're common sense. We have to make them common practice in every school district in America.

All across our Nation, we're seeing a grass-roots revolution in education, a revolution in accountability and rising expectations. This year we have a rare opportunity to use our new prosperity to help this revolution spread

* White House correction.

to every single school district, every classroom, every child.

Now, some in Congress believe the National Government has no business helping communities to improve their schools in this way. But I think strengthening education is a national priority. So I urge Congress to help reduce class size, to modernize our school buildings, to improve teacher quality, to make accountability for results—ending social promotion, reasonable discipline codes, all these other things that I have advocated—make these things the law of the land. If we do this, we can transform our public schools. We can lift our children up. We can give them the education they need to make the most of their lives in an exciting new century.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 7:30 p.m. on February 19 in the Cabinet Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on February 20. In his remarks, the President referred to Governors James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina; John Engler of Michigan; Tom Carper of Delaware; Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania; and Gray Davis of California. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 19 but was embargoed for release until the broadcast.

Remarks at the Labor Unification Legislative Conference

February 21, 1999

Thank you. I would like to—first of all, thank you for the wonderful, warm welcome—to express my deep respect and support for the IAM president, Tom Buffenbarger, and all of the IAM officers; the UAW executive VP, Ruben Burks—I know Steve Yokich is in Germany now—and all the UAW members here; and the steel workers' president, George Becker, and all the steel workers here; and of course, everyone up here on the platform with me.

George Becker would give his voice, his heart, and his life for his members. And he nearly gave his voice tonight.

I came here to do a number of things, but I'd like to start with first things first. The first thing I want to do is to say a simple, profound thank you. Thank you. Thank you for your support. Thank you for the fight you

have waged. Thank you for the miles we have walked together these last 6 years.

I also came here to support the merger of these three great streams of American labor, joining into a new river of 2 million strong. Throughout the 20th century, all three of you have been at the forefront in the struggle for human progress in America. The workers at River Rouge and Republic Steel shed their blood for more than their own rights and their own families. Their sacrifice gave all of us collective bargaining and the minimum wage.

The founders and members of your three unions gave us things all working people now take for granted as essential elements in a humane society: vacations, health care, pensions, grievance procedures. You have continued to lead the fight for all Americans—the fight to create Medicare to civil rights, to protecting our Nation against the Contract With America. The UAW, the steel workers, the machinists have provided the minds and muscles for a progressive society in our country.

Now, in this season of renewal and rebuilding for America, the house of labor is growing stronger. The creation of a mighty new industrial union—not just a merger but a new organization—will set the stage for even greater progress for your members and your families and for all the rest of America in the 21st century.

I believe you have an opportunity and, therefore, a duty, every bit as real as that which was seized by the great generations that preceded you a half-century ago. The labor pioneers had it hard. They wore their scars proudly. They were not always the easiest of personalities. But in spite of their contentiousness, I like to think that Walter Reuther, Philip Murray, and Thomas Talbot are up in heaven shaking hands at this new merger.

I thank you all for the strong support you have given not only to me and the First Lady and the Vice President and our administration but to our Democratic Party, especially in 1998. I'll never forget the sense of pride I shared on election night with John Sweeney, when he was at the White House, and we realized that for the first time since 1822, the President's party had won seats in