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PRESS RELEASES

Paige Calls Achievement Gap "Major Driver of Racial Inequity" in the United States

"Education should be about education—not politics, privilege, position geography, zip code, or class."

FOR RELEASE:

July 22, 2004

Contacts: Susan Aspey

(202) 401-1576

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige today hailed education as the best way to eradicate racism and the most important government service, saying the current achievement gap is the legacy of past failed education policies. He made the remarks at the 2004 National Urban League Conference in Detroit. The following is Secretary Paige's prepared text:

Acknowledgements

I thank the Urban League for this invitation. Your leadership has been a great service to this country. I am accompanied by Jack Martin. Jack is the Department of Education's Chief Financial Officer and Acting Director of the U.S. Selective Service System. He is a native of this great city and a product of its public school system.

Introduction

In his memorable book, entitled *Good to Great*, business development expert Jim Collins has some words of wisdom. He found that, if a company is to make the leap from good to great, one of the most important imperatives is to confront the brutal facts, and yet never lose faith.

Likewise, if we as African Americans are to build upon the good progress made by our forefathers and move to great progress, then it is imperative that we too confront certain brutal facts, while at the same time, never losing faith. So ladies and gentlemen, if we want to secure civil rights, provide greater business opportunities, reduce unemployment, eliminate barriers to social justice; and end racism, then it is imperative that we confront certain brutal facts and still keep the faith.

Here is one such brutal fact: The African American community is in educational crisis; a catastrophe is upon us. This is no exaggeration. For example, a new study from Northeastern University found that black male unemployment was so bad that, in 2002, one out of every four African American men, 25 percent, were idle all year long, a rate twice as high as that of white or Hispanic males.

In 4th grade reading, the NAEP, referred to as the nation's report card, reports that African American students score on average, 30 points lower than their Anglo peers. In some cities, such as Washington, D.C., the gap is as high as 70 points.

This is one of the brutal facts that we must face. There is more. One out of every four African American men does not complete high school. Of those who do finish 12th grade and graduate, more than 60 percent of African American men ages 18-24 are not in college. And there is overwhelming evidence that these problems continue generation after generation, passed down from father to son like a name.

The Achievement Gap

How did it get this way? It starts in elementary school. Maybe even before. Because millions of our children have been ignored, disrespected, under-educated, pre-judged, cast into the shadows, moved to the back of the room, become invisible, and then passed on and passed out. We know who these students are: These children are most likely to be African American, Hispanic, special needs, English-learning, and low income.

For more than two decades we have struggled with the achievement gap. Since it is still with us, another one of the brutal facts that we must face is that traditional answers and more of the same haven't helped. Despite the best efforts of teachers, parents, and so many other people, millions of students simply are not learning.

So we must change the system, and that means overhauling our approach, incentives, and expectations, while finding the ways and means to keep excellence in teaching. We must foster a climate of excellence, enabling all students to reach the highest levels of scholarship.

How bad is it? Consider what we found when we arrived in Washington. Here is a sample: many students have not been reading at their grade level; some were years behind; some haven't been able to read at all. We're talking about some students who are several grades behind in skill level. We're talking about some students who can't even read or do math. Some simply have no skills at all. None!

Four years ago, this is what we saw when we arrived in Washington: we saw a de

facto system of educational apartheid. This is no exaggeration of the facts. Millions of children were being left behind.

No Child Left Behind

This is the why of NCLB.

Our work begins in our educational institutions. Education is the civil rights issue of our generation. Education is the best way to eradicate racism.

Education is the best way to get our children off the streets, to help them stay healthy, to stop them from committing crimes, to keep them out of jail, to enable them to get them a good job, to prevent poverty, to assist them to find economic security, and to advance their personal growth. Education is the best means to teach our children values and good character. It is the most important governmental service. It is the key to a good economy and a prosperous future that is shared by all Americans.

That's what I mean when I talk about how education can erase racism, provide opportunity, and generate more social justice. It's the founding tenet of the civil rights movement.

Now, how do we achieve quality education for all children?

First, let's accept the brutal fact that what we have been doing has not worked. Then, let us go about the business of doing what we know works. It is called *No Child Left Behind*.

It gives us a vision, the tools, and the means to close the achievement gap.

Every organization in this nation that is devoted to minority advancement and civil rights should be embracing *No Child Left Behind*. I think anyone who takes the time to understand this law and to see past the partisan rhetoric will recognize that it is the best thing to happen to the African American community in a long time. It finishes the work that was started 50 years ago with *Brown v Board of Education*.

No Child Left Behind requires accountability, testing, and inclusiveness. It empowers parents with more information and more choices. It enables students in need to obtain tutoring and mentors. It is already improving quality and performance. *No Child Left Behind* is our best hope for giving every child—every single one—including African Americans—a quality education.

The law requires that states set standards. These benchmark goals have been put in place by each of the 50 states, not the federal government, because each state knows best what goals and criteria are most appropriate for its school districts. The law requires testing to see if those standards have been met. Establishing standards without testing is simply establishing a wish list. If we can identify children who are left behind early on, we can shift resources to help them. We can prevent a later life of trouble and lost opportunity. But we have to be able to know who needs help. We find that out by testing. Testing does that, especially testing on basic skills. We need to catch children at risk early and the only way to do that is through testing.

Now I know that there are some who think this will cause us to teach to the test. But teaching to a test on basic skill levels makes sure everyone has those skills. We simply can no longer assume that students will pick up necessary skills along the way. We can't just guess, we must know. We must be sure. That is the only fair and equitable answer.

We must make sure parents are involved and stay involved. That is why the law provides more information to parents and empowers them with choices. The law also identifies schools that need more resources, and targets their needs. The law gives more resources to teachers and gives them more information about how to become more effective educators. And the law is funded to get the job done. The President has set federal education funding at \$57 billion for fiscal year 2005. This is a 36 percent increase since he assumed office. Several studies, including two by the Government Accountability Office, indicate the money is there to fully implement the law. By the way, federal education funding for Michigan will be \$3.6 billion in 2005, a 47 percent increase since 2001.

The law targets resources to those who need it the most. It ensures equal educational opportunity. It works against what the President has aptly termed "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Opposition to the Law

Yes, there are those who oppose the law. There is much misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It is time to tell the truth. The real reason for opposition is not the law or its level of funding. There are some who hope to preserve the old ways, for reasons of pride, power, or convenience. There are some who hope to score political points against this Administration, even though the law was passed with a bipartisan majority of the Congress. And there are some who stubbornly, blindly believe that nothing good can come from Republicans.

Believe me, if this law or these levels of funding had come from a Democratic administration, the level of vitriolic comment and poisonous politics would be substantially less, probably non-existent.

And what alternatives do critics have to offer? We only hear more of the failed policies that leave millions of children in economic darkness. The current achievement gap is the legacy of those policies.

It is time to remember that education is not about professional fortune, possession

of issues, or occupation of rhetorical ground. It is about the well-being of our children and the future of our country. Education should be about education—not politics, privilege, position, geography, zip code, or class. And education must include all of our children—all of them!

The Future

We know that *No Child Left Behind* is starting to generate some amazing results, transforming the educational landscape. We already see considerable evidence that the law is working.

In the most recent results on the Nation's Report Card, or NAEP, the mathematics scores for fourth- and eighth-graders rose significantly across the board. Importantly, African American, Hispanic American, and low-income students accounted for some of the most significant improvements. As a result, the achievement gap is closing. Further evidence comes from a recent report by the Council of the Great City Schools, which reviewed test scores from 61 urban school districts in 37 states. Students in the largest urban public school systems showed significant improvement in reading and math in the first year under *No Child Left Behind*.

And last week, the nonpartisan Education Commission of the States found that most states are well on the way to meeting most of the requirements under the law. I was very pleased to see that almost every state is now publicly reporting achievement data for all students.

And the debate is shifting away from criticism and more on how to get students up to grade level. As states continue to implement the law, we see that it is working and students are achieving. We still have a long way to go, especially in meeting requirements for highly qualified teachers. But this report is a milestone in documenting the revolutionary changes underway and in showing that the law is achievable.

Conclusion

About 20 years ago, I was on a plane and I read a column by Don Williamson in the *Philadelphia Daily News*. It has stuck with me.

He wrote that he couldn't understand how we could live in the richest nation on earth but still have an epidemic of poor children who had been ignored by society at large. He warned that these children would become millions of "unskilled, uneducated, angry, dangerous adults."

Well, we must not ignore these children. *No Child Left Behind* is designed to help them. It is a law that is working. The academic achievement gap is the major driver of racial inequity in this country. It is the unfinished business of the civil rights struggle. NCLB is designed to close the achievement gap! The law will heal and bridge, bring people together, enable businesses to be more competitive, make our country stronger, and better fulfill the promise of public education.

Thank you.

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