Q Your predecessor in 1983 was told that this is a nation at risk, experts looked at the public school system and concluded that things were off track. And I

THE PRESIDENT: We want to challenge all the stakeholders -- parents, teachers, unions, school administrators -- to not only raise standards, but make the changes that are required to actually meet those standards, by having the best teachers and principals, by having the kind of data collection that tells us whether improvements are actually happening, and tying student achievement to assessments of teachers, by making sure that there's a focus on low-performing schools, by making sure that the standards that have been set are ones that mean a kid who graduates can compete at the international level.

Now, I know that's a very long sentence, but I got it in there.

(Laughter.) I think that the phrase, No Child Left Behind, was a great phrase. The problem was when you talked to folks on the ground, there was a feeling that, number one, the assessment tools that were used were too brittle; number two, that the federal government didn't provide the resources or the best practices to actually achieve those goals. And so what often happened was you'd get school districts that were either resistant to raising their standards, or would actually water down state standards in order to appear like they were meeting them. And there was never, I think, enough direction to schools about how do you really improve teaching quality, how do you really focus on the quality of principals.

So what we're trying to do I think is not to replace the notion that every child can achieve, but rather to put some meat on the bones.

Q If I may, wouldn't it cause some children to be left behind if you raise standards?

THE PRESIDENT: Not if you're putting in the resources to make sure that they can achieve. We do a child no great service by setting a low bar that they appear they can meet until they graduate and can't find a job because they don't have the skills.

In Chicago, we went through this argument at the time that was very controversial -- Peter will remember this -- but in retrospect seems obvious, which was ending the practice of social promotion. This notion that we should just graduate kids because they've reached a certain age and we don't want to embarrass them, despite the fact that they may not be able to read, that is a disservice to students; that's a disservice to parents.

And what we want to do is raise standards, but also provide the kinds of best practices, with money behind it, that evidence shows allows every child to meet these standards. And that's what this Race to the Top is all about.

Q Let me ask you about the Race to the Top. No administration as far as we can tell has ever provided this amount of money with so few congressionally mandated strictures on how it should be spent.

There are critics out there who say it's essentially a blank check, and they worry about the accountability of where that money is going.

How can you be sure -- what do you say to that, and how can you be sure that this money is going to actually produce the results that you hope?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the proof of the pudding is, number one, in the quality of the competition that's been set up. I think if you take a look at the requirements for obtaining these grants, it is based on the very best evidence about what works. Arne Duncan has gone through and talked to every educational expert out there, and they have arrived at a consensus that if you're improving teacher quality, you're combining that with high standards, you've got strong data to back it up, you're focusing on low-performing schools and not just the upper tier -- that all those things in combination produce results.

And so this is a classic example, I think, of evidence-based policymaking. It's not based on politics; it's not based on who's got more clout; it's not based on what certain constituency groups are looking for; but it's based on what works. Now, what we're also doing, though, is we're saying this is voluntary. If there are states that just don't want to go in this direction, that's their prerogative.

Q And you're willing, if it turns out that a politically important state like Ohio or California, if it turns out that they're ones that don't get the money, that's -- politics won't come into play?

THE PRESIDENT: Politics won't come into play. And we've been very clear about that. That's part of the problem in the educational debate, at every level, for decades now, is politics always comes into play and kids end up being left out.

Now, keep in mind that we're also trying to encourage consensus building. So, for example, we're challenging school districts and teachers unions to use the collective bargaining process as a catalyst for reform as opposed to an impediment for reform. And when you've got teachers, school administrators, parents, politicians all thinking in terms of what actually will help our kids become -- or possess the kind of skills that they need in order to compete in the 21st century economy, then we're confident that we're going to see improvement.

It may not be as fast as we would like. And the one thing that I think is always important is to say that improving the quality of schools and the student achievement is a long, deliberate process.
And one of the things we want to get out of is this notion that somehow one law, one program, magically is going to change things.

What happens then is people get disappointed, they scrap it, and they try a whole new thing. What we want to do is just keep on building on the evidence of what works.

Q Now, you just mentioned collective bargaining a second ago

-- if we could talk more about teacher pay. You've made clear that teacher pay should not be dependent on a single standardized test score, even though you're pushing for steps toward performance pay.

What do you say to teachers who believe it's unfair to be judged or paid, even in part, on the test scores of students who come to school with so many disadvantages?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think this is a -- this is something that I had to talk to teachers about all throughout the campaign and when I was a U.S. senator. What I say is you're absolutely right it would be unfair if we set the same standard for kids in Anacostia and kids in Georgetown, and without any additional resources, any additional help, we penalized the kids who are much further behind and reward those who are coming out of middle-class homes and already doing well.

The answer to that is, let's measure progress. That we can measure. So what we can say is that if a kid comes in and they gain two grade levels during the course of that single year, even if they're still a little behind the national average, that tells us that school is doing a good job. And that's just one example of how I think you can address legitimate concerns on the part of teachers while at the same time not watering down standards, and still maintaining a link between high-quality teaching and the compensation that teachers receive.

Q And one more question on this. You say you want to work with teachers unions and not impose a program on them. But there are critics who say, well, if you work with the teachers unions, those are the same entities that are obstacles to reform. How can you work with them and reform at the same time?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, look, I mean, I think that there is a cynical view, oftentimes ideologically driven, that says teachers unions inherently are going to be opposed to reform in our school system. I just don't believe that, maybe because my sister is a teacher and I know how hard she works and how deeply she cares about her kids.

I think teachers, understandably, in the past have been suspicious of reform measures that seem to make them into a scapegoat and don't take into account the extraordinary challenges that they face day in, day out -- everything from having to dig into their own pocket to buy school supplies, to not having the kinds of support services for kids who may have trouble outside of the classroom, to bureaucratic rules that get in the way of them teaching creatively.

So there are a whole range of very legitimate concerns that teachers have. And what we want to do is to assume that teachers want to see kids succeed, solicit their best ideas, and then shape and craft reforms that have their buy-in and have their ownership, because that's going to -- there's going to be greater success.

Now -- but I want to be realistic. There are going to be elements within the teachers union where they're just resistant to change because people inherently are resistant to change. Teachers aren't any different from any politicians or corporate CEOs. There are going to be certain habits that have been built up that they don't want to change.

And what we're saying here is if you can't decide to change these practices, we're not going to use precious dollars that we want to see creating better results; we're not going to send those dollars there.

And we're counting on the fact that, ultimately, this is an incentive, this is a challenge for people who do want to change.

I think it's important to note, just in terms of the politics of it, the same notion that somehow teachers unions would not accept reform

-- the fact is, is that we got this passed. And you've got national teachers unions, both the NEA and the AFT, that have been consulted even as we've been putting this together.

Q And do you -- how does one measure your success, in the sense that the health care battle is a sort of titanic battle that will either rise or fall in the legislature. This seems like a much more diffuse effort out in the country. Next year during the midterms, you know, three years from now, for your reelect, how do people judge whether Barack Obama has been successful?

THE PRESIDENT: I think we're going to judge success by the data. I mean, the nice thing is, is that the measurement of success is built into the program itself. We're giving the states the capacity to evaluate their own outcomes. And at the end of the day, everybody who's received these grants will be able to take a look at what kind of improvements have they made; was this money well spent.

I should note that there's going to be some measures of success that don't even involve the money that's been spent. Already what we've seen is, 46 states agreed to help develop common standards -- that's without us spending a dime. Already what we've seen are seven states who said, we are going to eliminate caps on charter schools at the same time as we are raising accountability with respect to charter schools. So you're already starting to see foment taking place in the education establishment as a consequence of --

Q Kind of as a result of the threat or incentive --

THE PRESIDENT: I would like to say incentive, yes. (Laughter.)

Q Let's talk charter schools for a second.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q You're pushing to expand them. You also want to shut down those that don't work. There are a lot of studies that show that the results on charter schools are mixed.

THE PRESIDENT: That's exactly right, which is why we want to open it up to greater experimentation, but we also want to make sure that they are not watered -- that they are not held to lower expectations than we're going to hold to traditional schools. And we think that's very important.

And Chicago has some experience in this. There are some charter schools that are as good as any in the nation, and then there are some charter schools that, frankly, have
been disappointments, and one of the things that Arne Duncan did, which I completely support him on, is those that didn't work, we shut them down.

Q You know, there are critics who say they're insulated from some of the problems that regular public schools face.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, here's the thing. I mean, I've been opposed to vouchers because I worry about resources being drained out of the public school system, creaming from the public school system until you have the public school system only dealing with the toughest kids to deal with.

On the other hand, I think charters, which are within the public school system, force the kind of experimentation and innovation that helps to drive excellence in every other aspect of life. And I think that's a positive thing, as long as we are continuing to set high standards and are applying them consistently to these charter schools.

Are there going to be issues in which, for example, the most highly motivated teachers gravitate to the more creative charter school as opposed to the traditional school? Those are all, I think, legitimate issues to raise.

On the other hand we shouldn't be punishing public schools that are trying to do things in new ways. We want to encourage that. And hopefully that will be a spur for other schools to follow their lead.

Q One last question, kind of broadening it out a little bit. Do you see -- or how do you draw the limit of what you see as the federal role in education? You're obviously doing some unprecedented things that insert the federal government into the policymaking arena on the state and local level. There's obviously been a lot of debate over 30 years -- 40 years, about that, sort of what that proper role is. You seem to be suggesting that there's more of a role for the federal government. Do you have thoughts about where that limit --

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I have to say, I just don't think about these things ideologically. I just want our kids to learn. We have a tradition of local school district control that I think is important to respect -- which is why this proposal is not a mandate. We're not forcing any local school district or any state to change its practices. But what we are saying is federal dollars need to be spent in ways that actually improve student achievement. And it's not just going to be based on politics.

Now, I think that's what taxpayers expect. And certainly given a track record of declining achievement -- or at least stagnant achievement -- in schools, I think parents want to know that if they're paying taxes not just to their local school district but also to the federal government, that that money is going to practices that are going to improve student performance over the long term, and that there's going to be some accountability measures so that we actually know whether this money is being well spent.

And, you know, look, I've said repeatedly that we're in the midst of a serious economic crisis and we're doing everything we need to do to deal with the immediate short-term crisis, but there is a slow-rolling crisis that was taking place even before this financial crisis hit -- and that was a health care system that was a drag on our economy, a lack of serious energy policies that would free ourselves from dependence on foreign oil, and an education system that used to be bar none the best in the world, and no longer is. So this is one of those foundation stones for long-term economic growth and we can't afford to ignore it.

Q One of your predecessors in 1983 was told that this is a nation at risk, experts looked at the public school system and concluded that things were off track. And I wonder, do you feel the same way right now?

THE PRESIDENT: Here's what I know: We used to have the highest graduation rates, we used to be close to the top of the pack in terms of math and science -- we are not, now we're in the middle of the pack. And never has educational performance been more important. We know that in a globalized era that low-skill, low-wage work is easily exportable and that the jobs that will pay a living wage in the future are going to demand higher skills. Right now we're not meeting that commitment to our kids. And I think this Race to the Top fund is an excellent way for us to spur that kind of excellence.

All right.

Q Mr. President, thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, guys.

END

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