THE EDUCATION PRIORITY

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I wish to address the Senate briefly this afternoon on an issue of which the President, Senator DASCHLE, and Congressman GEPHARDT, and other members of Congress, have spoken on so many different occasions, and most particularly during the last several days—the negotiations on appropriations which are taking place, even as we meet here this afternoon, on whether we are going to give the education the priority that it deserves. I believe families all over this country want us to get education funding high priority.

Families across the country want the federal government to be a helping hand in improving public schools. This year, the nation will set a new record for elementary and secondary school enrollment. The figure has reached an all-time high of 53 million students—500,000 more students than last year. Communities, states, and Congress must work together to see that these students receive a good education.

Local communities are doing the very best they can to keep up with the increasing demand for good facilities and high academic standards. States are helping. But the issue today is whether we at the Federal Government are going to be a partner in helping to improve public schools for communities and families across the country. I believe we must be a strong education partner. The President believes we must be a strong education partner. We are very hopeful that the final negotiation allocate scarce resources to strengthening the education of the children of the nation.

Mr. President, we know at the outset that money in and of itself is not the answer, but it is a pretty clear indication about what a nation's priorities are. If we look over what the budget was for 1998, we will see that only 2 percent of the Federal budget was actually appropriated in for education. I think most Americans would believe that that percentage ought to be a great deal higher. I certainly do. The President does.

I rise this afternoon to commend the President for making the case he has made in ensuring that in this final funding agreement, we give high priority to education. Some may wonder why we have to be concerned about federal support for education?

I want to review just for a few moments, Mr. President, the decision that was made by the Republican leadership in the House of Representatives in the earlier part of the year that shows why we have to stay here and fight for education funding. If Americans are wondering why the President continues to make statements about the importance of education, let's just review for a few moments how Republicans in the House of Representatives cut funding for education in June of this year. They cut $421 million below the President's request for title I.

Now, it is important to try to understand what the title I program is. The role of the Federal Government in education is to target the children in our country that need the most help. We have made a commitment to children from economically distressed families that they would get extra help in order to help them increase their academic achievement. We can see the need reflected in a wide variety of indicators. In reading, for example, 40 percent of fourth graders are reading below grade level. We decided as a nation that we would give extra help in reading, math, and other academic subjects, to those children who would qualify. That has been a time-honored program. An increase in support for the program was in the President's budget and it was paid for. But our Republican friends decided to cut the program by $421 million below President Clinton's request. I think that cut was a mistake, but that was a decision made by the House of Representatives.

Then, the cut a time-honored piece of legislation known as the Eisenhower Teacher Training Program—a program that helps teachers upgrade their skills so they will be more effective teaching science and math—by $50 million below last year. I believe very strongly that one of our main objectives as a nation should be to have a well-qualified teacher in every classroom in this country. The Eisenhower Teacher Training Program has played a very important and significant role in helping communities meet that goal. Nonetheless, that program was significantly cut back.

I think all of us understand there are political leaders—Members of Congress, those who are running for Governor, those who are running in local communities—who are talking about the importance of new technology in their schools.

We in Massachusetts were 48th out of 50 States in access to the Internet just 4 years ago. Then, in Massachusetts, we formed what was called Net Day, a cooperative effort between the private sector and the public sector, to improve children's access to technology. Now Massachusetts ranks 10th in the country in schools wired to the Internet. That was done by a cooperative effort of the software industries, labor, educators, business and communities. 50 miles of cable were laid down in Boston, voluntarily. All of the people who helped wire those schools understand the importance of having new technology and having Internet access.

Therefore, it is difficult for me to understand why, the House of Representatives cut education technology programs by $137 million below the President's program, and zeroed out the Star School Program, which brings distance learning to rural and underserved communities.

With the school budgets being cut back, critical programs are often eliminated such as music, the arts, and health programs. In addition, rural and underserved communities often have difficulty finding qualified math and science teachers. So, we developed a Star School Program so that all communities would have access to the best teachers who would be able to enter those schools through satellite. It was an overwhelming success. It has been evaluated and reevaluated and it has been one of the most effective programs that we have, particularly in rural areas —in urban areas as well, but particularly in rural areas. But the Star Schools program was zeroed out.

They even cut support for after-school programs. After-school programs have an important impact on providing children opportunities for constructive activities, such as doing their homework with the assistance of a tutor. It also benefits families because when children go home and see their parents who have been working hard all day, the parents will not be in the situation where they must say, ''Go upstairs and do your homework,'' but they might have some quality time with their children.

After-school programs also help keep children safe, drug-free and out of trouble. We know that juvenile crime peaks in the after-school hours between, 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. By developing after-school programs, we enhance education but we also have a dramatic reduction in juvenile crime and delinquency. The 21st Century Community Learning Center program is a modest program to help create models for other communities in the best practices for after-school programs. But, the Republicans cut the program by $140 million below the President's level.

Beyond that, Republicans in the House eliminated the Summer Jobs Program. A program that provides summer jobs for children who are in some of the most difficult educational and economic situations. A program that is a lifeline in so many communities across this country. Yet they zeroed it out—they didn't' just cut it by a quarter, or cut it in half, or cut it by three-quarters, but they eliminated it.

If you go to Chicago—and I see our friend, Senator DURBIN, from Illinois, who is an expert about this—to find out what is being done to reform their schools, you will find that they are providing academic enrichment and work experiences to children during the summer vacation. But, the Republicans zeroed out every single nickel for the Summer Jobs Program.

If you are asking, as we have heard the Speaker asking and the Republican leader asking, Why should we be suddenly so concerned about education? We need to be concerned because families across the nation want us to help improve education, but instead, Republicans cut the title I program that help the neediest children. They cut the Eisenhower Teacher Training Program. They eliminated the Summer Jobs Program. They cut $130 million from the technology programs for schools. They cut the afterschool program. That is why these hours are important; they make a difference.

The President has proposed that we make needed investments in reducing class size and modernizing our schools. He is making that speech against a background of a GAO report that schools have $112 billion in repair and modernization needs that they cannot address.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The time of the Senator has expired.

Mr. KENNEDY. I ask for an additional minute and a half.

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

Mr. KENNEDY. We ought to be doing all we can to repair and modernize the nation's public schools.

What kind of message are we sending to every child in America who goes to a school with leaking pipes, exposed wiring, broken windows, faulty heating systems, and no air conditioning? The message we are sending to every child is, they don't make a difference, they don't count.

We believe, and the President believes, that the children count, and it is important to provide them with safe, modern schools. We are here in these final days, to make sure that, unlike the Republican judgment that was made in the House of Representatives in June of this past year, any budget that is going to bear the President's signature or have our vote is going to make these needed investments in education that are essential for every working family in this country.

Mr. SARBANES. Will the Senator yield for a question?

Mr. KENNEDY. I will be glad to yield.

Mr. SARBANES. Will the Senator agree with me that with this emphasis on the global economy, if we don't educate our children to the fullest measure of their capacity, we are not going to be able to compete internationally? It has assumed a dimension now that we have never confronted before in terms of our economic survival in the world economy.

Mr. KENNEDY. The Senator is absolutely correct. By every kind of indicator of which countries are going to continue to survive and prosper in a world economy, education is the linchpin for these initiatives.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The time of the Senator has expired.

Mr. GORTON addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

EDUCATION

Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, it has been interesting to listen to the Senator from Massachusetts beating so industriously upon a dead horse. But the issue before the Congress, I suspect, in these last few days is not going to be on the level of support that the Congress and our appropriations bill provides for the education of our children in all 50 States across the country.

The debate now between the President and the leadership who are working on this budget is over who gets to spend it. The President believes, and the Senator from Massachusetts has outlined in his remarks a whole series of categorical aid programs—money for this specific program, money for that specific program—each of which carries with it its own bureaucracy here in Washington, DC, and, generally speaking, a bureaucracy of the State and always administrators in each school district to fill out all of the forms and to make all of the applications for assistance from the Federal Government. To that extent, an individual school district is lucky if 60 cents or 70 cents out of every dollar supposedly devoted by the Federal Government to education, in fact, ever gets to the classroom and to the students.

No, the battle in these last few days is not going to be over whether or not we shouldn't supply perhaps another billion dollars or more than a billion dollars above what we are already appropriating for the education of our children. It is going to be over whether or not we trust the teachers, the parents, the principals, the superintendents, the elected school board members and thousands of school districts across the United States to determine how that money can be most effectively spent on their students.

Mr. CRAIG. Will the Senator from Washington yield?

Mr. GORTON. He will.

Mr. CRAIG. About a year ago, the Senator from Washington came to the floor and offered an amendment that would dramatically change the way money flows out of Washington back to local schools, local units of education. And as I remember, there was a resounding vote here on the floor in favor of that.

Mr. GORTON. The Senator from Idaho exaggerates a little bit. It was a winning vote; it wasn't quite resounding.

Mr. CRAIG. It was a dramatic vote in the sense that Senators were voting their conscience about where the public wanted the educational dollar to go, not to get bound up in the Federal bureaucracy and have a lot of it spun off here, as the President apparently would want, but for that money to move right back to local units of education. Is that not true, and was that not the goal of this Congress?

Mr. GORTON. This Senate voted for just such a program last year. This Senate voted for just such a program this year. This Senate did so, I am convinced, because while the Federal Government, in spite of all of the speeches on the floor of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, comes up with only about 7 or 8 percent of the money that is spent in our schools that are, of course, primarily locally and State-operated, it comes up with 50 or 60 percent of the rules and regulations that must be met by our school districts, by hiring administrators, not teachers, people to fill out forms and read Federal regulations rather than librarians and new equipment for our students.

It was our attempt last year, and has been our attempt this year, and I hope and trust will be our policy when we finish an appropriations bill in a few days, that we trust the people in the States and in our communities and in our schools to come up with better judgments about the varying priorities of their students than can President Clinton or a Department of Education bureaucracy here in Washington, DC.

The thrust of the point that I have been attempting to make for a couple of years now is just exactly that: Where should this money be spent? Are we the experts here in this body on how each of 14,000 school districts should go about educating its children? Or is the true expertise in those school districts themselves?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The time of the Senator has expired.

Under the previous order, the Senator from Kentucky is recognized to speak for up to 15 minutes.

Mr. SARBANES. Mr. President, will the Senator yield me just 2 minutes?

Mr. FORD. Mr. President, I would like to give everybody some time, but I don't have but 15 minutes myself.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I might have 20 minutes so I can yield to the Senator from Maryland.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GORTON). Is there objection?

Mr. CRAIG. Reserving the right to object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAIG. Will the Senator restate his unanimous consent request?

Mr. FORD. I say to my friend from Idaho, I have 15 minutes. The Senator from Maryland would like to have a couple of minutes. I ask my time be extended so I can give him up to 5 minutes.

Mr. CRAIG. I have no objection.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered. The Senator from Kentucky is recognized.

Mr. FORD. I yield 5 minutes to my friend from Maryland.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maryland.

A PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Mr. SARBANES. Mr. President, I want to say in view of the comments that were just made, the Eisenhower Program, I ask the Senator from Massachusetts, that dealt with math and science as I understand it?

Mr. KENNEDY. The Senator is correct.

Mr. SARBANES. That was a program that we put into place during the Eisenhower administration.

Mr. KENNEDY. The Senator is correct.

Mr. SARBANES. As I recall, it was done on an overwhelming bipartisan basis.

Mr. KENNEDY. The Senator is correct again.