

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
ACT

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, we are, of course, poised this week to take on one of the most important issues we will face during this year. That is the issue of education.

As we talk about issues over the country and as we take polls, education is the first issue the American people are interested in, and very understandably so. Certainly there is nothing more important to us than education. I think nothing is more important than the future of our country with respect to the training of our children who obviously will be the leaders of the country. I am looking forward to that. I think certainly there are many things that can be done and that Congress can do.

Clearly, in my view, the principal responsibility for public education lies with the States, with the communities, and the decisions that are made with respect to the schools ought to be made primarily based on the needs of those schools as defined by the local leadership.

The role of the Federal Government then is one that is always debated in the Senate, and properly so. It is one on which there are different views as to what the role of the Federal Government is and should be. The amount of financial contribution made to the elementary and secondary schools is approximately 6 percent to 7 percent of the total cost. It is relatively small, but it is very important. Often it is oriented specifically to special education—to a particular need, and so on. That is good. We will, hopefully, have a bill before us that will provide for some commonsense education and a reform plan that will help all children attain their potential so they can be successful.

In increasing the accountability for student performance, money is obviously the key factor. Money alone, however, is not enough. Money just doesn't do it unless there is some other accountability there so we can measure performance. We need to support the programs that work and take a look at those that do not work. Obviously, there are some of each.

I think we need to reduce the bureaucracy so that officials in Washington are not deciding what we ought to do in Sundance, WY, or Philadelphia. The people in other parts of the country ought to have the opportunity.

We need to empower parents to be able to make decisions with respect to their own children's future. Part of what we will be talking about in consideration of the bill will be to hold schools accountable with annual reading and math assessments and annual testing that gives parents the information they need to be able to determine whether or not their children are learning.

Testing is somewhat controversial, particularly national testing. I hope we can give the States as much flexibility

as possible as to how they do that. On the other hand, with the kind of movement we have among children as they get out of school and go to other places, we need to ensure that as they are trained in Colorado, they are prepared to work in California; that their educational background will give them the ability to do that.

Testing gives educators the information they need to know what works, to see what is working in classroom and to improve skills and improve teaching effectively. That is part of what we will be doing. Federal dollars should not follow failure. We need to ensure that the programs that are funded by Federal dollars are programs that are useful and programs that are producing results. I think we need to make sure we support the programs that are effective and that are research-based programs. Schools need to be held accountable, of course. School boards need to do a lot of that. Parents need to do a great deal of that.

We need flexibility, of course. As I mentioned, school districts are quite different. They need to know that school districts are different. It is really not appropriate to send dollars, saying they have to be used to reduce the size of the class when in fact the size of the class is not the issue; computers are the issue or the building is the issue or teacher training is the issue. We need to do that.

Parents need to be empowered, of course, to be able to determine the quality of education the children are receiving so they can make some decisions. I think there has to be clear accountability. In many cases, I think the idea that you can have some choice among public schools is the way parents can have some accountability as well. In my hometown of Casper, WY, we have a number of charter schools—schools that are different from public schools—so that children have a chance to go to different places and do different things.

We will be talking about the Educational Opportunities Act. We will try to respond to the declining student performance we all hear about in our public schools. We need to change what is going on if our purpose is to have higher performance. The Educational Opportunities Act is designed to support learning efforts in all 50 States and helping local leaders determine what those programs need to have.

Also, we will be talking about how to help disadvantaged children meet the high standards and providing schools and teachers with greater decision-making authority to make the changes that will result in better performance and schools more responsive to the needs. For any school that fails to help its students over a period of time and make adequate progress, perhaps there can be an opportunity either for that school to be restructured or, indeed, in many instances for the parents to have an opportunity to send their kids to other public schools.

I don't think in the beginning that the proposal will have the voucher aspect of it, even though that is very controversial. But we can have the charter idea, and we can have the notion that people can choose.

There is nothing more important in education than the teacher. Give them a better opportunity for training. Alternative certification may be helpful to continuing learning opportunities. Teacher empowerment will be one of the programs.

We will have enrichment initiatives where there can be different programs designed for the 21st century learning centers, where you can have special kinds of schools and special kinds of programs happening for kids. There is also the gifted and talented program, the advanced placement program, and help for neglected, delinquent, and at-risk students. There are all kinds of programs that are necessary.

Obviously, safe and drug-free schools is something we want. We used to think about the problem of talking out loud or chewing gum in schools, and so on, as problems in school. Now problems are much more serious than that. There are drug problems, shooting problems, and other kinds of safety problems. So we are going to address that issue.

There is a title on educational opportunity initiatives where we can help children with the establishment of charter schools. More of that will be done. It is pretty much a local initiative.

We can help students across the digital divide so they are computer literate in the eighth grade and ready to do the things that now need to be done to be successful in the private sector.

There is bilingual education and educational enhancement. I think there needs to be some focus on students who speak limited English so that they have a better chance to succeed when they go out into the world. Obviously, the students will want to maintain their own choice of language, and that is great. But if they are going to be successful in this country, they have to be competent in English. I think that is something that can be done.

There is also impact aid. Of course, we have schools that are different, schools that are in communities that are largely Federal. For example, they do not have the same kind of tax structure and opportunities that others do. We have schools on Indian reservations and schools for Native Alaskans, and so on, that need special care. In Wyoming, we have reservations that need special attention. We can provide that special attention.

So these are the issues that will be involved in the educational bill that is upcoming. There is great concern over the amount of money that will be put in education. The Republican bill has more money in the budget than the President has asked. There will still be arguments made about needing more money.

Of course, one of the issues is that when there is a "surplus," there is never enough spending to suit some people. Others think there ought to be a limitation on the role of the Federal Government. I happen to agree with that in terms of its involvement in elementary and secondary education.

So I think we will have a spirited debate. It is interesting, though. Everyone in the debate, I believe, would agree that we have a real responsibility and are determined to help strengthen the educational system in this country. The question will be, how do we do it? How do we best do it? What are the areas in which we can have the most impact?

I have to confess, frankly—and I know there is testing, and so on—I am pretty proud of the system that we have and the young people with whom I have occasion to deal. Frankly, my wife is a special ed teacher, so I have a little insight into that. As I tour around our State, I am pretty darn proud of the young people in my State. I think they do a great job. Quite frankly, many of them are better prepared for life when they get out of school than I was or perhaps some of us were that are a little older.

So are we where we should be? No, of course not. Are there areas that are particularly in need? I think so. And we are in one of those areas right now. The results in the District of Columbia are not up to the normal performance levels. There are many of those areas. So we need to work on that. But we also have lots of dedicated teachers who do a great job and lots of school districts that do a great job.

So I am anxious for us to move on this matter of education. I think we will be on it today. Certainly we will be on it for some days. Indeed, we should be. As we deal with this question—or any question, for that matter, but this one maybe even more than others—we need to set some goals for ourselves as to where we want to be in 10 years, where we want to be in 15 years, what we want our children to be able to do, what opportunities we want to be able to provide for them, so that as we deal with today's issues, and the issues that are in this bill and are before us—each one is a rather small step—that those steps are directed for the attainment of a goal with which we can all agree.

It seems to me that is very important to having a successful discussion of an issue of this kind.

We need to have defined what our values are, what our goals are, where we are headed, and what it is we want to have as a result of the efforts we have made.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be dispensed with.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ENZI). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. DURBIN. I ask unanimous consent to be recognized in morning business.

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

AMERICA'S PRIORITIES

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, as the Members of the Senate are returning this week from our Easter recess, many of us spent time in our home States talking with our families and leaders, trying to catch the pulse of America. I was back in Illinois and had the opportunity to travel across my State and have a number of meetings which had a profound impact on me in terms of our debate in the Senate. I think these recess periods are valuable because, as close as we think we are to people, there is absolutely no substitute for sitting down with them and having some conversations about the issues we are debating.

One of the issues we have spent a lot of time debating in Washington is the whole question of the tax cut. I think most of us believe a tax cut is a good thing to do. This may be a good time to do it. There is a lot of uncertainty in America now about our economy. I met a lot of people during the course of my time back home who have seen their 401(k) plans and IRAs and mutual fund savings take quite a battering over the last 5 or 6 months. It has happened to virtually all of us who were not quite smart enough to get out of the market at the right moment.

I still have a very positive feeling about where we are going, and I do believe we can get this economy back on track. But I, frankly, do not believe we are going to do it with the proposal we have heard from the White House for a \$1.6 trillion tax cut. This is a suggestion by the President that we will have such prosperity and such surpluses over the next 10 years that we can make dramatic tax cuts now and be able to pay for them 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 years from now.

It takes a lot of insight and foresight to look ahead and suggest where America's economy is going to go. One of the people most respected in Washington is Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve. It was only 6 or 7 months ago that Chairman Greenspan suggested raising interest rates to slow down a hot economy. Since then, the economy has slowed down dramatically, and Chairman Greenspan has been racing week after week to lower interest rates to try to get things moving again.

So even the best minds at the Federal Reserve and the Chairman 6 months ago, 8 months ago, were guessing wrong about where America's economy would be today. I think it leads to a healthy skepticism by many people when President Bush says: I know what America is going to look like 5 years

from now; I know where we are going to be.

Take a look at the same economists President Bush is relying on. What did they guess 5 years ago for today? They told us America would find its economy in such a shape and the Federal budget in such a shape that we would have a \$320 billion deficit this year. It turns out that our surplus is about \$260 billion. So they missed it by \$580 billion 5 years ago when they tried to guess where we would be. So I think you might understand why this Member of the Senate and many of the people I represent are skeptical when the President says the best thing for America is to guess we are going to be so well off in 5 years or 10 years that we can create tax cuts now.

Many of us believe we are on the right track in terms of the general drift of our economy, though we are in a slow period; We do think if we make the right decisions now we can get back to see the growth of income in families, the increased value of our retirement plans, more jobs, more housing. But we have to make the right decisions now.

If there is going to be a tax cut, and I think there should be, it should be a sensible one, one that we can justify, not only today, but which might look good a few years from now. If we are going to have a tax cut, for goodness' sake, everybody in this country should profit from it. Everybody should benefit. All taxpayers should benefit.

Under President Bush's proposal, the \$1.6 trillion tax cut, 43 percent of the benefits go to people making over \$300,000 a year. These are people who have a monthly income of \$25,000 or more. They are the big winners in the President's plan.

I am sorry, but I do not believe those are the people on whom we should be focusing. Yes, they are entitled to a tax cut, as every American family should be, but they should not receive a disproportionate share of any surplus.

Let me give you two illustrations. A man came up to me Saturday night in Chicago and he said: You know, Senator, you just don't represent me in Washington, DC.

I said: What do you mean?

He said: I think you ought to vote for President Bush's tax cut because it would help people like me. I am one of those leaders in the economy who makes a difference, and you, in fact, have criticized the President for the tax cut that would help me.

I said: Tell me a little bit about your circumstance.

He says: I pay taxes. I paid a lot of taxes last year. I paid \$900,000 in Federal taxes last year.

How many people do you run into who paid \$900,000 in Federal taxes? I didn't know the man. But just a rough calculation—you don't have to be H&R Block to figure this out—suggests that man's income last year was \$3 million or \$4 million, maybe more. He paid