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The Education Continuum: Developing the Partnership
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Thank you very much. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you about what people in higher education can do to help those in secondary and elementary education.

Now, I must start with a picture of what our elementary and secondary system is or is not accomplishing. I have to do that because most Americans, including the overwhelming majority of those involved in education at all levels, have a false picture of elementary and secondary education. The picture generally is that most of our suburban schools are okay, but we've got a lot of problems in our cities, our inner cities, especially among minorities, immigrants and the economically poor. And so, for most Americans, the problems in education are problems of kids down the block or kids who are "different." It's not their problem, except in the sense that these kids with problems live in our country, and we

will have to support them if they don't make it and so forth. In a way, this is a comforting picture -- somewhat disturbing, but comforting to Americans.

Well, there's no doubt that the poor and minorities face problems that are huge. But this picture exempts the middle class in this country, and it's a false picture. Let's look at the most reliable information that we have about student achievement in this country, which are the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP covers a period of over 20 years, so we get a very good longitudinal picture of achievement in this country. NAEP tests a nationally representative sample of youngsters in the 4th, 8th and 12th grades. Youngsters don't know they're being picked, so they don't study for the tests.

What are the results? Well, as you look at the charts, you see almost flat lines over the past 20 years in reading, writing and mathematics achievement. In other words, youngsters are doing about the same today as they did 20 years ago. There is only one important exception. The average achievement of minority youngsters has risen substantially, and although there is still a big gap between their achievement and the average achievement of white

students, the gap has narrowed.

Now, let's take a snapshot of these high school seniors, many of whom you who in the colleges are about to receive. What's their profile? What do they know, according to the NAEP results that came out last year?

Remember, NAEP is testing high school youngsters who are about to graduate, not the 20-25 percent who have dropped out. We therefore can assume that we're measuring the most successful students, those who are about to graduate, those who are still there. And given this creaming process, we ought to have good news.

Unfortunately, we don't have good news. The percentage of youngsters graduating from high school who could be said to be proficient in high school level mathematics -- nothing too complicated, just being able to solve multi-step problems and use beginning algebra -- is 7 percent. Remember, that's 7 percent of the 75 percent who are still in school. So, in terms of the cohort we're dealing with, it's about 5 percent.

The next category is made up of students performing somewhere around the junior high school level when they're

graduating from high school: They can compute with decimals, fractions and percents; recognize geometric figures; solve simple equations; and use moderately complex reasoning. This constitutes a little more than one-half of the youngsters. The rest of our graduating high school students cannot perform at that level.

Now, in writing it's a little worse. Only about 3 percent of those who are about to graduate were able to produce a really good piece of persuasive writing, and only about one-quarter did what was considered an "adequate" job. In reading, there's 7 percent in the top category.

What all this means is that, depending on the subject, only about 3 to 7 percent of our "successful" high school seniors are really able to function at a pretty good level. About half the youngsters who will be graduating from high school put in a performance that we'd consider to be at the entering-high-school level. The only good news is that we have virtually no high school seniors who can't read or write or compute at all.

In other words, just about everybody can read simple signs and instructions on boxes and can do very simple

addition, subtraction, multiplication, division. The cutoff begins when it gets to be a little more complicated -- for example, if you were to ask youngsters to figure out their bill and the change they'd receive if they ordered a sandwich, bowl of soup or cup of coffee in the cafeteria. There's a very fast dropoff from doing a straightforward addition, subtraction, multiplication or division problem to doing some combination of those in a simple application.

Well, what does this tell us? This tells us that some of the most affluent kids who ever walked the face of the earth, kids who have got no excuses, kids who have got every advantage, aren't learning very much.

Now, how does this compare with other countries? After all, some people might say, well, maybe God only made 7 percent of us smart enough to understand high school mathematics. We can't, of course, compare our results with other countries exactly, because none of these other countries gives the NAEP exam. They all have their own examinations, and theirs are based directly on their curricula, while the NAEP exams are not. However, we can make some comparisons with great confidence.

For example, in Germany, no one can enter a university without passing centrally-made tests called the Abitur. If you look at the content and results of these examinations, you must reach the conclusion that every youngster who passes the Abitur and goes to a university in Germany would be in the top three percent in writing, mathematics and reading.

In Germany, 30 percent of the entire cohort pass that examination. In the U.S., only 3, 5 and 7 percent of the 75 percent still in high school achieve at comparable levels in the NAEP exams, which are much less demanding. Among students in industrialized democracies, the Germans are the highest. Except for us, the British and the Australians are the lowest, producing about 16 or 17 percent who pass the A levels or the O levels. All the other industrial countries are in between, and our NAEP scores are down at about the 7 percent or below -- a staggering difference.

But aren't we educating everybody, whereas these other countries just educate the elite? It's true that the United Kingdom is very bad in that respect. In the U.K., if you aren't on your way to college, you're likely to be out on the street at 16 looking for a job, which could take five, six, seven or eight years. This is a terrible problem in

Australia, too. But it's not a problem in Germany, where the system provides a good education for students who do not go on to college. Germany has a three-track system and their second track leads youngsters to technical schools which are very fine. Their bottom track leads students to an apprenticeship work-study program. Their bottom students achieve as well as our average students do.

It is simply no longer true that other countries throw their kids away before we do. In 1940, only about 20 percent of the youngsters in this country graduated from high school, but we didn't have the word "dropout" because kids were dropping into a world where they could be useful and productive without a high school education. After World War II, we increased the number of youngsters staying in secondary school until graduation, but so did all of these countries, although they may have been a little slower than we were. After all, they had a rebuilding job to do after the war.

What all this means is that over 90 percent of the kids who go to college and universities in the United States would not be admitted to any institution of higher education anywhere else in the industrial world. It means that what

many of us call a bachelor's degree would represent a junior high school or high school education in most other countries. So colleges and universities share a problem with K-12 education. If we don't do our jobs in elementary and secondary schools, universities become high schools, junior high schools and institutions for remediation.

So the question is, what's wrong? How can we explain the huge differences between student achievement in the U.S. and these other industrial democracies? We can say there are cultural differences, and we can talk about the impact of our diversity on education, but I don't believe that is the answer. Are we saying that cultural differences mean our kids can't learn to read and write? Are we saying that diversity means inferiority? When diversity is used as an excuse for youngsters' not being able to read, write or to perform in mathematics, that's what it translates into.

No one talked that way during the first 200 years of our history. In the 1870s and 1880s, when the British started slipping and the United States was moving ahead in the world, there were tomes written in Britain about American education and what a strength our diversity was. Has it suddenly become a weakness?

I don't think diversity is the answer -- especially since most of these other countries are culturally diverse: the Scandinavian countries, France, Germany. And yet, they have very high achievement for all of their youngsters.

What are some of the reasons for the differences? One is that no other industrial country tolerates the kind of poverty and lack of decent health care for families and children that we do in the United States. There's no question that this has a tremendous effect. Twenty years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan told us that a huge number of children were growing up with little or no supervision -- essentially growing up in the streets. He said that we could expect a lot of crime, and that is just what we are getting.

I hope and believe that the new administration will make some major efforts to address those very difficult issues. They are very important out-of-school factors in our problems. But I'd like now to go to some of the in-school factors. I don't think you will hear what I want to say from anyone else in the education establishment. That's surprising because it's just a matter of common sense, something we apply all the time in other areas. Whether you're running a college or university or a business, if

you're doing pretty well and all of a sudden you notice that you are falling behind while your competitors are pulling ahead, you start looking at what they are doing. Do they have a better product? Do they have a better way of packaging and selling it? Or have you done something that's made you lose ground? Not only do you take a close look; you might also try to steal some of the people that are responsible for the other outfit's success. Or you might look at some of their ideas to see if you can go your competitors one better. You certainly would not start considering a lot of untried ideas, notions out of the blue.

Why aren't we following this common-sense rule in education? Why aren't we finding out what our more successful competitors are doing? The German, French, Japanese, Scandinavian systems are all different, but they work very well compared to ours. One thing they have in common is national agreement on what students should know and be able to do -- on the content of the curriculum.

That's central. If you don't know where you're going, you're not going to get there. That's true of businesses and it's true of schools. We all know that learning to a certain extent depends on continuity; it depends on being able to build on what you already know. And that's impossible to

achieve today in America. In the United States, curriculum is developed separately by 50 states, and a state curriculum is not usually very prescriptive. Typically, it is a big fat book talking about the kinds of things that teachers ought to do at each grade level. The general tone is, "If it fits, wear it; if it doesn't, do something that you or the kids would like." In other words, do whatever you want.

As a result, college teachers all say that it is impossible to tell, when you get a bunch of first-year students, what they have read or what they know. This is true at every level in our education system, and it affects teaching and learning. If you're a fifth-grade teacher, you don't know what the fourth-grade teacher has done. If you're a student who moves from one school to another, you have little sense of continuity. We have the most mobile society in history, and it makes sense to try to ensure that there is continuity from one class or one school to another. We do it in most other realms, but not in education.

We often hear that our textbooks are also part of the problem. In other countries, textbooks are much thinner and cheaper than ours. They're also more to the point and more useable by students. Why? If you know what you want

students to learn, you can design a textbook for that purpose. But if you've got a set of curriculum frameworks in California and another in Texas and another in Illinois and another in Pennsylvania, and you're a textbook publisher who wants to sell in seven states, then you're bound to produce a big, fat, boring, unfocused book that students can't use. That's what American textbooks are.

The lack of standards also affects teacher training. If you know what teachers are going to teach, you've got a pretty good idea of what teachers need to learn. Teacher training in countries with successful standards-driven systems is specific and gives teachers depth in the areas that they will cover with their youngsters. As a result, they are able to approach topics in five or ten or fifteen different ways. In the United States, we can't train teachers in this concrete way because we don't know the state or even the school system in which they'll be teaching. So teacher education typically deals with the philosophy and methods of good teaching in a general kind of way, which most teachers do not find useful.

But there's something else that's important about having a common curriculum. If you're a teacher in a sixth-

grade class, as I was once, and you give the youngsters a lot of work, the first thing they do is start complaining: "It's too much. It's too hard." Also, their parents are likely to call and say, "Look, my kid's in the Boy Scouts." Or "My kid's taking music lessons." Or "Why are you giving so much more work than the teacher last year?" So what happens is that the curriculum is negotiated with the students; it's negotiated with the parents. And the teacher who gives youngsters a lot of work to do is looked on as mean, and his demands are considered capricious and arbitrary.

Furthermore, the absence of a mandated curriculum means that each teacher looks out at the students and decides what can be expected of them. A teacher may feel sorry for poor or minority students and say to himself, "Given the problems these kids face, how can I give them all this difficult work to do?" This serves, of course, to dumb down the curriculum. And if you don't give it to the kids, they're not going to learn it. Then you later confirm they haven't learned very much.

Where you have a common curriculum, you've decided what you want students to know when they're 18 and you map backwards to what should they know at 17, 16, 15, 14, 10 and

so forth. In a system like that, when a teacher gives work to his students, he can say, "Look, every other sixth grader in the entire country is doing this work. If they can do it, you can. And if all the sixth graders did it last year and the year before that, don't tell me it's too hard. I'm not your enemy piling on this work. I'm your coach. I'm here to help you meet that standard."

When there are external standards to meet, the relationship between teachers and parents on the one hand, and students on the other, is totally different from what we have in the United States. Here, the standards vary so widely that they seem to be capriciously imposed by each individual. This destroys our authority and our credibility.

I am sometimes asked by members of Congress whether we can have common standards in a country as diverse as ours. The answer to this is, "In which state or community do you think kids shouldn't be able to read well or write well or understand mathematics or science? Youngsters don't all have to read the same book, but they have to develop the same levels of comprehension."

What I've been describing are content standards, but

other countries also have performance standards. Performance standards say what's "good enough." But good enough for what? Here's another place where we Americans have big problems. Not all youngsters, even given the same intellectual diet, will reach the same levels. We are all different. But we have people running around the country saying that all American students must achieve at a "world-class" standard. Other countries don't talk about world-class standards. They have their own standards, and they are different for admission to college, to technical and other types of schools and to apprenticeship programs. If you have a single standard, it's going to be a minimum standard because no society is going to fail the overwhelming majority of its students. So this false egalitarianism that leads us to say everyone must meet the same standard means that we end up basically without standards. We need a system of different standards for different purposes.

When I was a teacher, every time I gave an assignment or a quiz or said to the kids there would be a test on Friday or asked them to work on some project, it didn't take three seconds for two or three or five or ten youngsters to yell out, "Does it count?" So I want to deal with what is the toughest issue of all, for those of us in higher education

and for us as Americans. It's going to be as tough as cutting certain entitlements, raising taxes or developing a health care scheme that limits some of our choices.

Why is it that students in other countries meet high standards and students in our country do not? Well, you'll remember that one afternoon after Socrates had made a fine oration, one of his listeners told him he was a "great teacher." Socrates shot back and said, "No, not at all. I'm only a midwife." Socrates was saying that it is the student who does the learning, just as it is the mother who gets pregnant and who carries the fetus for nine months and then goes through labor. The midwife can help only during a very short period of time. And just as surely, it is the involvement and work of the student that produces the reading, the writing, the listening, the imagining, the questioning. It is the engagement and effort of the student that creates learning and not what the teacher does. The teacher can only help.

Wherever I go across the country I hear teachers saying, "I taught the students, but they didn't learn." Did you ever hear a salesman say "I sold the car but they didn't buy it?"

The inescapable fact is that our students do not achieve as well as students in other countries, and the reason is that our students don't work as hard as students do in those other countries. I'm talking about OECD countries. I'm talking about countries where they have television sets and all the other distractions that we try to blame for our kids' poor performance. Why is it that in other countries kids turn the television sets and VCRs off and our kids don't?

When I was a youngster and my parents went off to work, I'd want them to hang around awhile and I'd say, "Why are you going to work?" My mother would answer, "You want to eat?" Most people work because they have to. Some of us are fortunate; we like doing what we do most of the time. But you can't build a society that way. We all know that while intrinsic motivation is wonderful and it's great to be able to maximize it, societies and institutions work on incentives for most people.

So we can try to make life more interesting more of the time for our students, but I have never met a youngster who, when he first opened a play by Shakespeare, said, "I can't wait to get into this." Most kids say, "It's old-fashioned.

It looks boring. It's difficult. I don't need it." And after they are compelled to read Hamlet or Macbeth for some external reason -- like they're going to flunk if they don't -- they may find they like Shakespeare. Then, they'll tell you they turned on the TV to watch a Shakespeare play or they read one on their own.

A lot depends on compulsion and incentives, and what is missing from our system -- what we have taken out of it -- are the incentives for hard work for students. Students are workers. If they don't work, they don't learn. Most workers do not work because they enjoy what they're doing most of the time. They may get to enjoy it eventually, but they don't start out that way. Students work for the same reason that most adults work: There's something that they want and won't get unless they do that work.

What do high school youngsters want? Well, there are two things. They either want a job when they get out of school or they want to go to college. The problem is that we as a society have told youngsters that they can get what they want without working for it. It's as though we passed a law saying that from now on showing up for work every day is voluntary but you can get your salary and health benefits and

pension whether you come to work or stay at home. That's what we've said to youngsters; we've said that you can get into a college or a university -- and about 90 percent of them do -- no matter what you've learned.

When I was a kid my parents would tell me almost every day, "Work hard or you're not going to get into college." They were telling me the truth and I knew it. So I worked hard and so did a lot of other youngsters. When I turned to my kids years later and said the same thing, they laughed at me. They said, "Dad, you don't understand. Nobody works and they're all getting into college." And they were right. The only students who work now are the ones who want to get into certain elite colleges and universities.

What about jobs? In these other countries, if you can show that you've reached certain levels, the equivalent of our major corporations will give you preference for a job on a track where you'll get somewhere. And of course youngsters know this. Throughout high school, they talk about their brothers and sisters and cousins and about how, because they worked hard and achieved, they got terrific jobs. There is a clear and visible connection between hard work and achievement on the one hand, and getting what you want to get

-- a job or college entry -- on the other. That's missing in the United States.

First of all, our good employers don't hire any 18- or 19-year-olds. They say, "Why should we hire kids who don't have any real work experience? Let somebody else hire and train them. Then, when they're 24, we'll take a look at their work record." Just think of the message that sends to the terrific student who worked hard in school and who ends up getting the same lousy job as the kid who played hooky half the time. The message is that working hard in school does not pay. The kid who was out playing gets the same reward as the worker. The kid who listened to his parents and teachers and did his best to achieve looks like a nerd; he looks stupid.

People commenting on the new student aid commission raise a lot of concerns about access. I too have concerns. I don't want a single youngster who can profit from a college education not to get one because he or she can't afford it. But I also think it is outrageous that we hear no discussion about the way low admissions standards in postsecondary institutions act as a massive disincentive for students to learn and turn our colleges and universities into big,

expensive institutions for remedial reading and remedial mathematics.

The most important thing those of you in higher education can do for elementary and secondary education is to set standards. Send a message to youngsters that they won't get into college without achieving genuine academic success. Of course, no institution can do this by itself. Students turned down by an institution unilaterally trying to raise standards would simply go elsewhere. All that institution would achieve would be to put itself at a disadvantage. Some people will object that higher standards are a way of cutting off opportunities for higher education. That's not the case. Youngsters who don't make it to college the first time ought to have a second and a third chance, and those who don't get into a college and university ought to have other opportunities for continuing education throughout their lives. This is not a matter of cutting off opportunities. It's a matter of giving appropriate incentives and appropriate education to every American.

I ask you to take the leadership and say to the Congress and the President that 15 years from now, entry into

four-year institutions in this country will be based on the same standards as those of other industrialized countries and that each year for the next 15 years standards will be raised a little bit. This will send a message down to elementary and secondary schools, to parents and to teachers, that there are consequences for not learning and not working and not turning off the TV set.

By the way, if you don't do that you're in a lot of trouble yourselves and you know that.

I want to emphasize again that a coalition for higher standards is not aimed at keeping kids out. Germany, for example, which has very high standards, graduates a higher percentage of youngsters from four-year institutions than we do. Don't get the idea that because you have high standards you're going to exclude people. You may end up with more BAs who really have a BA.

Can we do it? A couple of years ago when Poland was still under martial law, I was over there meeting with some of the people in the underground, and on my way back to the United States, I picked up a copy of the Wall Street Journal. In it there was an interview with a Polish economist. The

Wall Street Journal asked the economist a question: "Do you think it's really possible for Poland to be lifted from the terrible state of poverty it's in -- this economic mess -- to a state of relative prosperity?" The economist replied, "Yes, there are basically two ways. There's a natural way and there's a miraculous way. The natural way would be if a band of angels descended on Poland and lifted it from poverty to prosperity." The reporter said, "If that's the natural way, what's the miraculous way?" The economist answered, "The miraculous way is if the Poles did it themselves." At first, I thought it was a Polish joke, but it's really a joke about us. There is no band of angels to take us out of our current mess, and I suppose that it's unlikely that we will do it ourselves because we haven't up to now. But I certainly hope that we do. Thank you.

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Q: What about the likelihood that standards will have a disproportionate impact on certain ethnic groups?

A: I certainly agree that it will start out being disproportionate, and the question is the amount of time that it will take for it to become less disproportionate and eventually to develop a system of equity. Let me cite an example.

In the early 1970s, there was a movement in the United States to impose minimum competency requirements for high school graduation. A suit in the state of Florida, Debra P. vs. Turlington, alleged that the overwhelming majority of students who were achieving below the proposed standards were African-American and Hispanic. The suit further alleged that if they were told they would not get a high school diploma unless they passed an exam like that, they would drop out. This would deny these students the benefits of a diploma, and it would dramatically increase the dropout rate.

At first, the judge issued a temporary injunction against denying diplomas to students who failed the test. But he lifted it later when he became convinced that imposing these standards would ultimately benefit the students rather than hurting them.

What happened? The first year the minimum competency

exam was given, something like 80 percent of the minority youngsters flunked it. The next year it was about 65 percent. By the fifth year, more than 90 percent passed.

The question is, do you believe that youngsters who are at the bottom -- African-Americans, Hispanics and other immigrants, poor whites, etc. -- given the proper help and given the incentives and the motivation, will be able to perform on an equal basis? I believe they will. Will there be a short term disparate impact? Yes, there was for a few years. Are they absolutely equal in Florida now? No, they're not absolutely equal, but they're a lot better off for having been held to a standard and having pushed and worked and moved up than they would have been if we hadn't put it in.

The dropout rate in higher education is higher than it is in secondary education. A lot of people are wasting time and money and leaving college without anything of value to themselves or society. And we not only end up with huge numbers dropping out or leaving without any benefit; we also end up with large numbers graduating whose degrees are suspect. If we can't have basic standards indicating that everyone who's gotten a diploma has met those standards,

we're creating a two-class or two-caste system and a set of dual standards. I don't think that does anybody any good.

If you want to raise standards, you need to bring all the constituencies into a room. I had this discussion with Lamar Alexander and William Bennett about a year and a half ago. One of them said, "Well, we agree with you, but you know that raising the standards for college admissions is like tampering with Social Security: Everyone has a right to go to college." And I said, "Well, there was a Social Security Commission with a lot of people on different sides, and they came up with some pretty good answers." I think we've got to bring in leaders of minority communities and the academic community, and I think we've got to take their concerns into account. I certainly would give them very heavy weight. But my view is that it's not a question of whether we should raise standards, but how.