

SPEECH TO THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL
ADMINISTRATORS LAS VEGAS, NEVADA
FEBRUARY 24, 1984
DELIVERED BY PIERRE S. du PONT IV
GOVERNOR OF DELAWARE

In case you hadn't noticed, you ladies and gentlemen have been in the news a lot lately. It's hard to pick up a newspaper these days without reading about crime in the streets, war in foreign countries, bad decisions in Washington, or the condition of the nation's schools. I'm sure all of you are a little bit tired of being part of the bad news, and tonight provides all of us with a refreshing opportunity to honor some of the people who are busy giving education a good name.

For my part, I would like to talk about some of the good things that have been happening in education all over the country in the last year or so. As many of you know, this year I am serving as chairman of the Education Commission of the States. In that capacity, I have had the opportunity to travel all over the country talking to educators, to the elected officials responsible for education budgets, and to a great many people who simply are interested in education, either because they are parents with children in school or because they are business executives who depend on our schools to provide well- educated employees. And what I have discovered in my travels is that, while there is criticism and concern over the quality of education we are providing our young people, there is also a great deal of support for what you are doing, and a willingness to help.

That support comes in a variety of forms. Many Americans, if we are to believe public opinion surveys, are willing to pay more for better schools. Parents, concerned about the education their children are getting but in the past too often willing to leave the problem-solving to the schools, want to know what they can do to help. Business leaders, who often have been critical of the education system because it doesn't provide them with literate and clear-thinking job applicants, are willing to get involved in making our schools better. And politicians and local school officials have been putting money in their education budgets for higher salaries, more textbooks and better programs.

This has been happening all over the country. In Arkansas, the legislature convened a special session just to deal with education and provide more money for schools. In Mississippi, the state sales tax was increased to provide more money for schools. In California, nearly \$1 billion dollars has been added to the education budget, the school day has been lengthened and courses in mathematics and

science have been added to the curriculum. And just this week in Florida a merit pay plan for teachers, including testing and bonuses for performance, was approved and funded.

Delaware, too, has responded to the needs of the education system. Last fall I appointed a special task force, modeled on the Education Commission of the States' Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, to study public education in Delaware. After six months of work, the Delaware task force completed its report and recommendations. The members of the task force concluded that our education system is good -- but that it could be better. The task force reached several important conclusions, and I would like to mention a few of them.

First, there was a recognition that the standards we set in our schools must be raised; we must provide more and better instruction in core subjects and require more of our students in the classrooms and at home at night when they are studying. Second, if we are to succeed in education reform, local school districts have to shoulder more responsibility -- by setting stricter standards, providing up-to-date teaching materials, and paying enough to attract good teachers. And, third, the task force recognized that we are at risk of losing the momentum provided by this national attention on our schools if we don't provide some mechanism to assure that its recommendations are implemented.

In Delaware, we have addressed that last concern by creating a monitoring committee -- drawn from education, business and community leaders who made up the original task force -- to help draft legislation, establish a working relationship with the education system, and report to the governor and the legislature on what progress has been made. But a group of citizens, all of whom have other responsibilities to families and jobs, cannot be expected to undertake the day-to-day task of keeping our schools on the right track. That job belongs to the people who administer them.

Last September, I met with the American Association of School Administrators in Arlington, Virginia. At that time, the trickle of education studies, reports and policy statements of the last decade had become a flood, and I suggested that what we needed was not more studies, but an agenda for education improvement, an agreement on a new direction for public education in this country. At that time, I urged you -- the people who make our schools work -- not to lose your voice in this discussion of what we must do.

That agenda has taken form in the last six months, and educators have provided invaluable guidance in the process. We've taken a very big, and very important, step toward fixing what is wrong with education in America by agreeing to restore the focus on fundamentals in the classroom, to stop requiring schools to be all things to all people, to demand excellence of our students and reward it in our teachers. The national focus on excellence in education frequently has been compared with the academic reforms of the 1960's, but tonight I would like to tell you why I think today's challenge to education is much greater than in the years after Sputnik, and how we can assure that time -- and the short attention span of the public -- doesn't erode the progress we have made.

First, however, we should consider this debate about education in perspective. What has been wrong with our schools is a symptom of what has been wrong in our society, and one doesn't have to look far to find other symptoms.

Beginning in the 1970's, America made a series of wrong choices and non-choices that have caused many of the problems that we are suffering in the 1980's. We have yielded to short-term demands at the expense of long-term interests. Indexing of benefits without indexing the taxes to pay for them has turned out to be an unaffordable luxury, politically popular in the short term but economically damaging in the long term. We have enacted huge increases in social spending, paying for them first out of the defense budget and then through inflation, with a disastrous impact on both our national defenses and our economic stability. Deficit spending has produced a national economic crisis in both inflation and unemployment that we surely would never have approved in the short-term if we had considered the price that we would pay in the long-term. We allowed the public and private sectors to become adversaries instead of allies, and we opted to institutionalize unemployment rather than train people for meaningful work.

In the 1970's, too, we ignored important trends. We simply shut our eyes to what was happening, either because the reality was too painful to contemplate and the price too high to be paid, or -- worse -- because we failed to understand the choices we were making. We simply ignored, for example, the impact of foreign competition upon the American economic system. We could not believe that the Japanese, the Germans, and the European economic community could out-produce American workers. So while they improved their skills and productivity, we approved bigger benefit packages and lower productivity for our workers. We watched our steel industry, our heavy equipment industry, and our automobile industry be devastated by foreign competition.

In education, we have allowed our students to load up on electives at the expense of core subjects, substituting driver education and photography for calculus and chemistry. We have been designing open classrooms when we should have been finding ways to make students open their books at night. When we should have been teaching skills that would have some value in the future, we have been graduating students with few skills at all.

I do not believe that America would have made the choices of the last two decades if critical analysis and clear judgment had been applied to public policy. I do not believe that, if we had thought through the effects of the policy decisions of the late 1960's and the 1970's, we would have clung to the status quo when the world around us was so clearly changing, or ignored the consequences of program decisions that have led to the overwhelming national problems we now have.

We have made decisions about what government should do without considering the cost, about our national economy without considering the consequences, and about education without considering the conflicting demands we put on our schools, or the effect on the quality of education in America.

Harry Truman once expressed the wish that he could find a one-armed economist because he was tired of his economists saying to him, "But, on the other hand" And I think that you might be experiencing the same frustration President Truman experienced. Many Americans believe that public education is not performing satisfactorily. But look at what we have been asking our schools to be and do. For years, people have been telling you that they want you to educate their children, to teach them to understand what they read, to write clearly and intelligently, to compute accurately, and to think precisely. Then they tell you -- on the other hand -- that they want you to teach them to fly airplanes and do their own laundry, guard their fragile psyches from the pressures of competition and excellence, keep them smiling and keep them out of their parents' hair.

The quality and availability of education in America played an important part in making this country great. But we have allowed education to drift away from its basic values at a particularly perilous time for our nation -- when foreign competition is making inroads on our economy and technology is making millions of jobs obsolete. And the men and women whose skills are no longer needed are poorly prepared to learn new skills.

In the years after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, American educators were

called upon to institute rigorous academic programs in our schools. We were in a race, and you held the key to winning. We needed more scientists, we needed more mathematicians, we needed scholars and researchers who could compete with the best the Russians turned out in their education system.

There was a national sense of urgency, a sense of mission that led us to examine our education system and rededicate it to academic excellence. Despite its tiny size and great distance from the earth, Sputnik was something tangible; the competition had reached a height unavailable to us.

What is happening in America today is less tangible, but the threat to our well-being is much greater. The demands on our national resources, as well as the cost of failing to meet the challenge, are much greater. In the 1980's we are going to have to match the achievements of the 1960's space program every day, year in and year out, if America is to remain competitive and prosper. We must develop a workforce able to adapt to rapidly changing technology and able to compete in an international economy.

The American economy is no longer isolated and self-contained. Imports have a permanent place in our economy, and the majority of our industries face foreign competition. Auto workers in a Chrysler assembly plant in Detroit aren't just competing with the General Motors assembly line across town, but with equally skilled and more productive workers in Europe and Asia. When you stop to think that 70 percent of American industry faces competition from overseas, then you realize the extent of the problem.

There will be very few forty-year careers in the same factory for American workers; instead, American workers probably will have to learn the skills required by new careers several times in their lifetimes. And that means the education they receive before they join the workforce is vital to our economic well-being. Americans will need the best reasoning skills, the best communications skills, the best mathematical skills we can give them, skills that will not only prepare them for their first jobs, but give them the resources to learn new jobs as technology and foreign competition change the workplace.

That means that you can get out of the babysitting business and back into the education business.

You don't have to do it alone. For the first time in a long time, it isn't just educators talking to educators -- because nobody else is willing to listen. People are listening,

and willing to do something about our schools. If we are to succeed, we cannot allow this dialogue about education to end. If we are to succeed, then we need businessmen talking to us about what is going on in the workforce and providing answers instead of just grumbling. We need the support of parents if we are to create a disciplined learning atmosphere in the schools and at home, and have our students meet higher standards. And state and local governments must provide the support and the money to assure that up-to-date textbooks are used and that we can keep good schools. You need to know that, a year or two from now when the bill comes due, that somebody is going to pay it.

This country is ready for tougher standards in our schools, so that our students have the reading, writing, mathematics and reasoning skills the workplace requires. But it won't be enough if we simply declare tougher standards and then go on with business as usual. We must test our children's skills every year to assure that they are learning, and provide remedial training for those who are not. And we must apply the same standards to teachers as well, testing their skills, evaluating their skills, and rewarding superior achievement.

I don't have to tell you about the importance of paying teachers enough. I suspect that some of the best teachers in America are in this room, but simple economics have forced you out of the classroom and into higher paying administrative jobs. We're talking about going back to basics. I have heard criticism of the back-to-basics movement in our schools -- it is too simplistic, it is based on a yearning for the simpler days of the 1950's, critics say. But I would suggest that the criticism itself is simplistic. We're talking about creating an educational foundation on which Americans can build and grow in years to come, about teaching skills that will prepare our students for the rapidly changing technology of the 1980's and 1990's. There is very little wisdom in suggesting that an education based on developing reading, writing, mathematics and reasoning skills is poor preparation for our future.

All of us know that excellence in education cannot be mandated in Washington, and that the impetus cannot come from Denver, Colorado. Excellence in education is possible only if the states -- and, more importantly -- our nation's school districts decide that our schools are going to be better. For that we need your leadership.

Without that leadership, the consensus about education that we as a nation have reached will be lost. The willingness to devote more of the community's time and resources to our schools will evaporate. If America's economic well-being in the decades to come depends on the basic skills Americans bring to the workplace,

then your role takes on even greater importance. I am confident that you will exert that leadership, and that the dynamism so evident in education today will stand America in good stead in the years to come.

Thank you.

###