

**Remarks for Vicki Phillips
Education Commission of the States (ECS) Annual Meeting
Austin, Texas
July 2, 2008**

Opening

Thank you, Governor Pawlenty. And let me congratulate you on receiving the chairman's gavel yesterday.

Governor Pawlenty understands the challenges and opportunities facing our education system. In his own state he's focused on raising standards and expectations in high school, and under his leadership Minnesota has developed an innovative approach to improving science, technology, engineering, and math education. Thank you for your strong commitment to our nation's students. We know you will wield that gavel wisely.

It is an honor to share the stage today with one of my heroes, Ron Wolk. Ron, congratulations on receiving the Conant Award today.

And thanks to ECS President Roger Sampson and his team for their policy and research work.

And it's good to be in Texas. We have funded a number of programs in this great state – here in Austin, in Houston and in the Rio Grande Valley. It is a pleasure to work with them and it is truly a privilege to be here with you – to be part of a program that includes leaders from

across the country who are working to improve our schools. It was James Bryant Conant, ECS's co-founder, who said, "Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out."

I'd like to spend some time talking with you today about how together we can stick our necks out to achieve more dramatic, transformational changes in America's schools.

But let me first say a few words about the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the role I have assumed in Seattle.

Several of you have asked how my job at the foundation differs from my previous work as a superintendent and chief state school officer. Like so many of you, I have spent my career fighting for children, answering every day to parents, teachers, students, and school boards. (Truly, some of the nation's toughest bosses.) I know what it's like to creatively beg, borrow, and re-purpose limited resources to fund innovation and reform. I now have fewer bosses, considerably more resources, and a touch more freedom, but old habits die hard. I sometimes still have to be reminded by my team at the foundation – "Hey Vicki, we have money. We can fund that!"

The "empty pockets" mindset is not an easy one to break. And, really, that's a good thing. Because while we do have significant resources, we have set our sights on some very ambitious goals:

- Stop the transmission of HIV/AIDS**

- **Eradicate malaria and polio**
- **Improve nutrition and sanitation in the developing world**
- **Create opportunities for the world's poorest to lift themselves out of poverty**
- **...And, in this country, dramatically increase college readiness and college completion rates.**

These are not small tasks. We must be smart about how we allocate our resources.

One of the things that prompted Bill and Melinda Gates to start their foundation was an article they read in the New York Times some years ago about the hundreds of thousands of children in the developing world who were still dying from rotavirus, a disease long eliminated in the United States.

What struck Bill & Melinda was a little simple math. They calculated that a relatively modest investment to combat rotavirus could have profoundly positive results for some of the poorest children in the world. This is typical of how they operate. They were moved to action by a combination of math and their sense of social justice.

A guiding principle for the foundation, which finds expression in their decision to tackle global health challenges, is the simple phrase “all lives have equal value.” In the United States, that phrase comes to life in their desire to reduce inequity and create opportunity for all citizens. A huge piece of this effort is our work to ensure that every

student has access to a great education and graduates from high school prepared for college, career, and life.

And we mean every student, in every classroom, in every school, in every community -- rural, suburban or urban.

This is a huge task, but we're inspired by the ambitious thinking of our leadership.

In 2005, Bill Gates declared at a meeting of the nation's governors that "America's high schools are obsolete." This was the kind of bold statement common to innovators, but a little jarring to policymakers. As important as "what" Bill said was "where" and "when" he said it. It was a clear call to action to the assembled audience of governors, business leaders and policymakers.

Everyone there understood, just as you all here understand: This is urgent work. *Education Week's* "Diplomas Count" report estimates that some 1.2 million students from the class of 2008 will not graduate on time. That's one student leaving school every 26 seconds! If education is the key to opportunity in this country, and the source of our global competitiveness, then these numbers are cause for serious concern—and serious action.

To this end, the foundation has invested nearly \$2 billion in more than 1,800 schools in 47 states and the District of Columbia – and that number is growing. Our strategy has encompassed:

- **New, innovative small schools**
- **Improved systems for data and accountability**
- **Catalyzing public and political will for college readiness**
- **And evaluating our work along the way.**

We all know how complex and massive the challenges are. But we are motivated and we have learned a great deal in these early years.

We have seen thousands of students' lives changed in small and new schools. Some of these schools have produced graduation rates 40 and 50 points higher than the schools they replaced. In New York City's small schools, graduation rates are now 20 percentage points above the rate of other schools in their district. This is real progress.

The students, their families, teachers, district administrators, grantees, independent education reformers and leaders like Chancellor Klein and Mayor Bloomberg all across this country deserve credit for seeking significant improvements in their schools. The foundation will continue to work with small schools, and focus on helping them increase the number of students who graduate prepared for the demands of college.

Over the last decade we have helped to demonstrate that low income and minority students can achieve at exceptionally high rates when they are given the expectations, resources, and opportunities that are

commonplace in our nation's best schools. Visionary leaders in places like New York, Chicago, and here in Austin – some of our country's most challenging school districts – have generated remarkable progress through vast amounts of hard work, a lot of courage, and a tireless focus on accountability and data. It is a privilege for the foundation to *work* with them and *learn* with—and from them.

We have also invested in district infrastructure and capacity building, and we have supported sophisticated advocacy campaigns at both the national and local level. Our advocacy grantees have helped us focus attention on the need for more effective teaching in our most challenged and impoverished schools, encouraged state leaders to adopt meaningful graduation rate measures and standards, pushed for linking data to sound decision making, and encouraged the presidential campaign dialogue to focus more on education. Reform-minded advocacy is good for the mission and drives results.

We're pleased with the success we've seen, but we know there is so much more to do. My task is to build on and expand the good work that has been done.

As we move forward, there are several truths upon which we can hopefully all agree:

First: The pace of progress in the education sector is too slow. We must be impatient and demanding when it comes to our work. We can't wait for reform to take root with the next generation. THIS generation of low-income and minority students needs to be ready for college and a living wage job. We have seen pockets of extraordinary change in innovative districts and school networks, but we're not seeing the system-wide change America's students deserve.

According to the 2008 Diplomas Count report, approximately 71 percent of high school students in 2005 earned a diploma. The Manhattan Institute found that only 34 percent who left school in 2002 qualified for four-year colleges. Among African-American and Hispanic students, the readiness rates are much lower. The marginal gains of the last few decades are just not acceptable. This next decade, we need to see significant results.

Second: To prepare students for college, we have to focus on the work that teachers and students do together and the quality of the student-teacher interaction. What happens inside the classroom has the greatest impact on learning.

You know that teachers matter. They matter the most. The importance of effective teaching is so powerful that researchers studying high schools in North Carolina found that having a class with a strong teacher had an impact 14 times greater than having a class with five fewer students. So how we can support and develop more effective teachers? As Governor Sibelius has said, "Unless we

have great teachers in the classroom, the rest of it is just window dressing.”

One way to help teachers be more effective is to establish fewer, clearer and higher standards to guide instruction. You have done the work on standards, but it’s time for version 3.0 – fewer, clearer, higher, college-ready and internationally benchmarked. Together with strong data, they will help teachers, parents, administrators and policymakers see more clearly what benefits students. One of the things teachers appreciated the most when I served as State Secretary of Education in PA (for Governor Ed Rendell) was that we prioritized standards and aligned our state assessments accordingly. Teachers valued the fact that we took the mystery out of both and left them the flexibility to be creative in how they helped students achieve those standards.

Global comparisons suggest that students in countries with fewer, more coherent standards achieve at higher levels. So let’s give our teachers clearer guidelines that lead to greater college readiness.

And let’s use technology and other innovative instructional models to engage today’s kids where they are, and to better match how, where and when they learn.

Third: We need more facts. And we need to demand evidence for the decisions we need to make.

The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts. In the education sector, the fact base is lacking, and even where we do have data, methodologies are suspect and consensus elusive.

In other words, what passes for truth is too often anything but. A few examples worth noting:

- **Education is underfunded.** I was not always popular with some of my fellow superintendents when I would say this, but in fact, the US is among the world leaders in per pupil spending, which doubled in this country from 1970 to 2005. Yet we lag other industrialized countries and even some developing countries in student achievement. If student learning were just about funding levels, the US would be near the top. Ultimately, how we spend the money is as important as how much we spend. Andres will talk later today about what the world's best systems do well—often with less money than we have here.
- **Small class size is critical to student achievement.** In fact, as I mentioned previously, there is a growing body of evidence that a strong teacher has a much greater impact on student achievement than class size. Reducing class by just **ONE** student costs the system billions, yet it is often where we turn first in the search for solutions.

- **Test data only tells us about test achievement.**

In fact, many test scores are reliable predictors of other markers of success, from college performance to earning potential. And teachers who are effective in helping students raise test scores are highly rated on other metrics, such as conveying a love of learning and teaching life skills. We need better, richer measures of student learning. But getting rid of tests is not the answer. Tests are simply ways to determine whether people have learned things and we need to know if our kids are indeed learning.

So we need to start getting our facts right, and then let the evidence guide our policies.

We also need to ask the right questions, and let the facts guide us:

- **What is college readiness?**
- **What makes a student college ready?**
- **What makes a teacher effective?**
- **What is the best and fairest way to measure both?**
- **How many students drop out?**
- **How do we measure the drop out rate? (And are we using the same methodology?)**
- **How many students go on to college and graduate?**
- **Are high school standards aligned to college standards?**

The list goes on and on. These are fundamental questions, yet we do not have good fact-based answers.

This is an area where we intend to push the system. We are already supporting the Data Quality Campaign, a project of the National Center for Educational Achievement, to improve the collection, availability, and use of high-quality education data. The campaign is also working to get the 50 states and the District of Columbia to implement a longitudinal data system. This would let educators and policymakers track individual student progress and begin gathering facts about college readiness and practices that make a significant difference in student learning.

We at Gates are going to be relentless about acquiring quality data and the need to focus on evidence-based decision making. And we will go where the evidence takes us.

Let me conclude on a personal note. This conference has allowed us to look ahead to a future where all students receive an education that prepares them for the challenges of college, the rewards of a meaningful career, and the responsibilities of life. I think it's also important to reflect on the profound shift in education that has occurred during our lifetimes.

A decade ago, few states tracked the performance of low-income and minority students. A generation ago, it took a presidential report – A

***Nation Prepared* – to spark a debate over standards and expectations. And half a century ago, the Supreme Court finally removed the legal justification for unequal schools.**

The story of American education is a continuous expansion of opportunity – of hope -- and we are fortunate indeed to be involved in such meaningful work.

Like many of you, I see reflections of that story in my own life. I come to this work not only as a former teacher, state school officer and superintendent, but also as a student nobody expected to amount to much. I grew up in a small Kentucky town with a name straight out of a Dickens novel: Falls of Rough, and rough it could be. We had no indoor bathroom and my stepfather worked two jobs to make ends meet.

I wasn't pushed very hard in school, even though I did well. I think people figured I was too poor to succeed. But I had the good fortune to become friends with a girl in my high school business class who urged me to think about college.

In the curious ways of our household, going off to college wasn't really in the game plan. My family pretty much disowned me when I announced I was leaving home to attend a college only 90 minutes away. They were worried I wasn't ready, and they also felt I was abandoning them and the values they held dear. College for their

daughter was not one of them, and years passed before they accepted my decision to leave the nest.

I benefited from the high expectations of my classmate—and I know firsthand the difference that encouragement can make in a child’s life. That’s why my blood boils when people write off students who may have grown up in circumstances similar to mine. Earlier this year, I read an article that quoted the principal of a school with a high dropout rate. By way of explanation, he said that at any big high school, "you're going to lose kids."

I cannot accept this notion. In America, children do not have a right to fail – they have a right to succeed. I believe—and I know you believe—that all young people deserve the opportunity to succeed by design, not by luck, as was my case.

We’re a long way from Falls of Rough, and given that I have a captive audience of education policymakers, I won’t let this opportunity pass to make a direct appeal to you as I close my remarks.

I call on all of us here at this meeting and in the education sector to:

- Get behind the elements of the Data Quality Campaign. Without strong data we do not know what does and does not work and what will and will not take us from the marginal gains of the past to significant gains in the future. We will not see improved**

student learning system-wide – indeed we won't know if students have learned anything at all.

- **Put an effective teacher in every classroom in every low performing school in America. All children in this country have a right to quality education, and all of them have a right to an effective teacher. And in the next decade, let's define effective teaching once and for all. Let's recruit the best to take the place of those we are losing to retirement. And let's hold teaching in the esteem it deserves in this country.**
- **Establish fewer, clearer and higher standards for learning and achievement that guide young people toward college readiness and give teachers the clear direction they need to guide and empower their students.**
- **Work to make sure that every student who graduates from high school in this country is prepared for a two- or four-year college. We know that the skills required for the family-wage careers of the 21st century mirror those required for college success. That's why we must demand college readiness from our education system.**

Use the levers of influence that you each have as policymakers to make these things happen—for the nation, for our communities, for families, and most importantly for our students.

We are in an election year, and in the coming months I hope we will hear a lot about education from the two presidential candidates and from candidates for other offices around the country. Some may seek to frame the discussion in partisan terms. I hope not, because this is an issue that should transcend partisanship. Let me leave you with the words of the late Tim Russert, who spoke at the Silent Epidemic conference in 2007.

“This isn’t a Republican debate or a Democratic debate anymore. This is an American problem that needs to be solved by people finding common ground and common purpose, reaching across party lines, reaching across philosophical and ideological lines. Those kids who quit school aren’t Democrats, Republicans, liberals, or conservatives - they’re our children.”

These are America’s children. And as Governor Pawlenty said yesterday, “We are still the best in the world once inspired.”

Let us be inspired!

Thank you.