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Transcript of the plenary address by Dr. Eugene Hickok, Under Secretary of Education

“A New Class of Duties”: - A Message for American Higher Education

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be here in the frozen tundra of North Carolina. Obviously, it is because I come from Virginia that you decided to do this to me. I really appreciate it. The only solace I can give you is that while you might have been cold going back and forth from the Duke Chapel this evening, it is even colder in Washington, DC, and that is a miracle because Congress is in town! It is a real pleasure to be at Duke, to be on a college campus. As you mentioned, David, I come from the academy. I miss the academy greatly. With any luck someday I will return to it.

It is a real pleasure to be with you this evening. Let me start out by bringing greetings from Secretary Paige. I will be leaving tomorrow morning to meet him in Austin, Texas, on the campus of University of Texas, for some discussions about accountability challenges in K-12. I also want to bring greetings from President Bush and I have to tell you that being a small college professor from a small town in Pennsylvania, Carlisle, (which is where Beaver Cleaver still lives, by the way), every time I get a chance to say “I bring greetings from the President”, I still can’t believe I get the chance to say that. Regardless, of one’s politics or partisanship, when you get a chance to do that, do it. It’s a nice feeling, frankly.

We gather, you and I, at a very unique time in this nation's history. A time unlike any in this nation's history. Obviously the events of September 11, 2001 changed everything forever in so many ways. It touched every life, sometimes in very personal ways and in many ways yet to be determined. But after that we have the ongoing action in Afghanistan, the specter and ongoing threat of our war on terrorism and it is difficult to begin to get the perspective in place that the war on terrorism affects us each every day. It affected me getting on an airplane today, as it did many of you. We've already grown used to it. How quickly we've grown used to having to deal with these new challenges. There is the possibility of another conflict in Iraq and the ongoing complex international discussions that take place in capitals all around the world and at the UN, and I bet take place in many of your classrooms on campuses and in your homes. Our lives, not just as educators, but as individuals, have changed in ways we are yet to even uncover. These are the issues that become the first thing we hear in the morning and the last thing we think about when we go to bed at night.

Interestingly, it seems to me, the times that we confront were already challenging long before the events that I just mentioned. It was only a few years ago that the boom economy was leading to great opportunities at the state, local and federal level in terms of being able to spend money, lots of money, wisely. The economy, having reversed, is now arguably on the way back. But if you talk to any Governor, including the Governor of this great state, you will hear that there are tough choices because of this economy and the challenges of the post-Cold War era. I know when that happened, when the wall came down, when everyone celebrated the opportunities of this new era in international relations and global politics, there was this momentary sense of euphoria. Just think how the world could be better now that that huge problem, that huge

challenge is gone. But, as we've seen in the post-Cold War era and certainly in the era of the war on terrorism, America has a broader responsibility, like it or not, wanting it or not. And in a post-Cold War era there are all kinds of new sorts of sources of disruption of unanticipated places, unanticipated means and individuals. We live in an age in which one person, well positioned, highly skilled, and determined enough, can bring down a nation. We live in a world in which there is an internationalization of just about everything. And while you know that, you're used to that, that's what you deal with, that's what you talk about, I think most of our fellow citizens are only now beginning to realize what that means.

I think that it's because for most of us, we need to step back every once in a while and realize how quickly things have changed and how dramatically they have changed. I won't tell you when I went to college but the fact is that when I was in college we still talked about foreign cars. There's no such thing as a foreign car anymore. Before I went to college, we were still talking about transistor radios. We were talking about and used something that is almost gone from the American landscape - payphones. When I was a young child growing up in Virginia, we used to watch newsreels in movie theaters. When I was in college traveling on an airplane was still a pretty big deal. There were three networks with fifteen minutes of evening news. My point is that was a little over a generation ago.

There's been far more than a generation of change since then. Today, quite literally, we can be everywhere all the time. We have the technical ability, the ingenuity, and the entrepreneurship to do anything everywhere all the time. We have instant access and we think we should get instant gratification. We can custom design virtually everything. From classroom design to

textbooks, automobiles to homes, whatever. There are no limits anymore due to time or circumstance or space or structure. Let me give you three examples of the fact that the world we live in now has no limits, endless possibilities, but, some challenges with those possibilities. In 1999 I was fortunate enough to be invited to go to the Baltic Republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as they were struggling to emerge from Soviet domination. I knew very little about those countries but I studied hard. I didn't speak the language and I really wasn't quite sure what I was going to be doing. I checked into my hotel room, which wasn't much of a room, turned on my television, and found only one station. It was being broadcast from Finland. It was MTV and it was Madonna. I knew the Soviet Union was finished. I mean, it just stunned me. I never expected to see that.

More recently, let me take you to a classroom in Dublin, Ireland. Elementary school fourth-graders sitting in front of a computer with an Internet camera, talking to fourth graders in Erie, Pennsylvania in "real time". I thought it would be an awkward kind of conversation, but you know, fourth graders are far more engaging than we adults are. I stepped back and listened for the next half hour to a conversation with the ocean between us completely gone. And the fourth graders in Erie were looking at the fourth graders in Dublin and they started asking about school uniforms because these fourth graders had uniforms on. Which is the way they do things in Ireland. And in Erie, Pennsylvania, it just so happens that the school board had just passed an option on school uniforms, so these fourth graders were kind of curious. And the fourth graders in Dublin asked the students in Erie about religion because it's a big issue in Ireland. And, of course, the fourth graders in Erie are going, "What? What? What?". But they really came together when they started talking about things like beanie babies and tele-tubbies and the big

news that had happened only a week before about the breakup of the Spice Girls. My point is there was a chemistry there that told me and anyone who watched it, there's great potential here. There's international potential with good ideas and smart technology to change everything. The third image represents both part of our greatness and part of our challenge. There was an image on the front page of the major newspapers about a year ago coming out of Afghanistan showing a KFC store blown apart. This shows part of our great potential and part of our great challenge in terms of who we are and what we believe and how we act.

My point is that given all these challenges, given this brave new world, one could have rightly assumed that the new millennium would lead to all kinds of walls perhaps being torn down, all kinds of barriers perhaps being removed. But it does seem that there are many walls that remain and many challenges and many obstacles left to conquer. There are many challenges to maintaining a stable world, a prosperous and free nation and advancing the cause of freedom, justice and human dignity around the world. Some of those challenges are the ones that I just mentioned. Information. The very fact that we have so much information means that it's tougher to use it wisely. Managing information, usable knowledge. We live in an explosion of information and in many ways we make poor decisions because we do not know how to use that information wisely. The new technologies, the very technologies I just spoke about and ones that are far more advanced than that now. With those new technologies and all the opportunities they present to us they also are susceptible to new and very different kinds of threats. And a society that is so dependent on those technologies can be rendered broken in moments because of these threats. An interdependent world, an internationalist world in which a nation, any nation's political economic upheaval is every nation's business. No nation can afford to ignore

what is going on anywhere, any time, in this world. The world has long had to grapple with huge disparities in wealth and resources and opportunities and rights. Huge disparities coupled with greater awareness of other nations and other people and how that can lead to very human, very understandable feeling of resentment, of hostility and of frustration. All very understandable. And those feelings so easily become sources of instability within a nation and among nations. Those are some of the walls. They haven't disappeared. They haven't changed.

The greatest challenge, it seems to me, is ignorance. The lack of adequate education. There is a challenge within the United States that is to know better the world beyond its borders. And I would like to offer the argument that it is also a challenge for the rest of the world to get to know us a little better as well. I say the obvious and I say it's obvious because you know this but education in its fullest sense, in its deepest richest sense, goes beyond classrooms. Education in its fullest sense has always been the way to answer the challenges of human life. The challenges we face today, the ones I've talked about and countless others may be unique in many ways. But, they're human challenges. They can be met through the right combination of learning, knowledge and wisdom.

Having said all that, I'd like to talk a bit about how this administration views education broadly, and then talk a little bit more specifically about international and higher education. Obviously, the President and Congress spent a lot of time in the last two years focusing on the President's highest domestic priority, education reform. The No Child Left Behind Act is now a little over a year old. Its impact is only now beginning to be felt as states begin to look at the regulations and requirements and begin to adjust however they must adjust to the new demands of the law. My

point in mentioning that is simply to say that for this administration it was our primary focus and we did so with a sense of urgency. And there is a sense of urgency still within the administration and I hope within all of you. Again, we can put politics anywhere we want to in this but in far too many places, in places that would surprise you, fine young men and women can't read or do maths and it is not their fault. And in this nation, in this wealthy nation, that is just not acceptable. And so the President working with bi-partisan majorities in both houses of Congress, focused on K-12.

You know the data, but let me lift a few other figures and facts from the data, because they have some relevance to the discussions that you will have for the next couple of days. If you look at geography scores on our national assessment of educational progress, it has been different for quite a while. Sixteen to 18% of eighth graders can't locate the Mississippi River on a map of the United States. Fully one-third of America's fourth graders when they look at a map of the United States cannot locate the state where they live. But, even more relevant, 83% of America's young people can't locate Afghanistan on a map. On an international survey to determine levels of knowledge of international events the US students ranked last when it came to being able to identify what is most associated with Al Qaeda. So, my point is that our focus early on has been and will continue to be K-12, but as I said to my colleagues during dinner, it cannot be and we will not let it be our only focus. There's too much to be done. There is too much potential to be achieved.

In the coming weeks, for example, Congress will start looking at reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the IDEA that is a very, very tough law in a very,

very litigious area of public education. Very expensive, very emotional. It will be a very, very tough discussion. At the same time we will begin to look at reauthorization of vocational and technical education, the Perkins Act. Probably the longest federal law in education, with the richest history. We will offer some new ideas in special education as well as some new ideas in technical education. We'd like to think that education is supposed to be about ideas.

Reauthorization shouldn't be something that just goes through the hoops. It should be a chance to think a little bit differently about what we are doing in education. Look at Head Start, for example. I mention these because they may not seem relevant to your world but I hope you will try to make them relevant. I hope you will try to find ways to make sure that as you discharge your responsibilities on your campuses and with your students and with your colleagues, that you find ways to think how a discussion on special education, K-12 education, vocational education, early childhood education, does have relevance. And how you can contribute to that discussion.

And then, of course, we've already started conversations with the hill on the reauthorization of higher education. As these conversations begin, all of them, including higher education, I think you'll see certain fundamental themes emerge. One of the things I like about the way we approach these issues is we tend to start with certain principles. And try to develop policy ideas based upon those principles. It's not just a policy shop. It's an attempt to really have some consistency across and throughout education policy. For example, we would like to talk to congress and talk with you and listen to you as we discuss performance and accountability and outcomes in higher education. These conversations are going on all over the country right now. They're conversations that need to take place. Higher education needs to be able to demonstrate

how it talks about these things the same way K-12 has to. There will be different ways of doing things, very different ideas I'm sure, but, I think we've reached a point in time where the tuition payer, or the tax payer, or the state legislature, or the Congress is looking for some evidence of the wisdom of their investment. Because they are being told they need to find that wisdom and there is more talk about options and opportunities.

Another theme is greater access. How to make sure that as students have greater access they also have greater success. How do we demonstrate that? How do we ensure it? What do we do when there is a lack of it? Educational designs based on what works. Funding based upon what works. We are eager to address these issues and we need you to help us get into that conversation in all areas of education but particularly, higher education.

My purpose then, in mentioning these principles is to assure you that our sincere goal is to look for ways to ensure American higher education remains so strong that the rest of the world still wants to come to America to study. It is one of our great strengths. It is one of our great, great resources. But, we need to be vigilant to keep it that way. That is the task in a changing world.

In line with earlier statements made by President Bush, we'll seek ways to encourage and to expand opportunities for broad engagement, broad engagement in international issues with the international community. We hope for more opportunities for higher education to partner in a variety of ways. Partner with K-12 schools students and teachers so that the artificial dichotomy between elementary and middle, between middle and high, between high and post-secondary begins to fade away. And the fact is that I think a lot of our K-12 students and teachers would

benefit tremendously. And the system would benefit tremendously from what you have to offer. And frankly, we can't afford to not have you do this as a nation. There should be a greater emphasis on how we prepare people for teaching and for citizenship in this new global age. It is no longer and it hasn't been for a long time, acceptable for classroom teachers not to have an appreciation for the international global world in which their students will live and in which they will have to operate. I don't have a prescription for how you take care of that problem, but I know you can't ignore it.

It seems to me that all of higher education can do a great deal to transform our popular understanding of what an education should provide a person in this country and how it has to be informed by the broadest of international perspectives. As we focus, as we will continue to focus on K-12 reading, we will at the same time make the argument that it is very important, now more than ever before, that we also encourage and teach more languages at younger ages to all of our kids. We have a real challenge here. Far too many of our kids can't read their own language. So, we are already in trouble. But, we cannot sit back and deal with that problem and then start thinking about foreign language acquisition. We've got to start talk about doing it now and throughout one's education. And that's going to be difficult. It will be difficult because of resources. It will be really difficult, however, because of culture. In far too many places public education is all about taking care of my kids and my community and not needing to learn that foreign language. And that's got to change. And we can talk about it. We need your help to get it done. It's important that we find ways to make sure that all of our students, and when I say students, I mean of all ages and everywhere, learn more through your work, through our work at the federal level and at the state level of other languages, other cultures, other countries. That

they learn about the rich history, geography, literature and art of other nations. It's difficult to over-estimate that the little conversation between Dublin and Erie might have changed lives.

It is important that we continue and broaden the international exchanges that have so enriched faculty and students in this country. They have brought back benefits that we are only now beginning to understand and learn how those benefits might have huge dividends later on. It is important that we get engaged as we are in the international community in a variety of places and ways and venues. We will rejoin UNESCO this year and the education attache will be assigned to Paris. We need higher education to help us accomplish all of these things. To help us forge new friendships and to improve old ones and to try to help us educate each other to end animosities. We need higher education to develop tools to secure the homeland, to ensure a workforce that can be globally competitive and to anticipate the challenges and create the opportunities that are yet to take place.

These conversations are going on now. I want to re-emphasize the importance of the term "conversations". Our goal in this administration is to listen far more than to lecture. It is to encourage conversations at every level so that we get a chance to learn from you what we need to be talking about in all these areas. And these conversations take place within a broader context of international emphasis at the department of education. Just a few months ago, Secretary Paige announced a series of policy directives aimed at raising the visibility and the coherence of the international activities of the Department of Education. I have to confess, when I arrived at the Department, I didn't even know these activities were going on. I learned quite a bit and right now those activities are under my office. First and foremost, he said in his

directives, we need to broaden our focus to build international relationships anywhere we can, at any level we can, and as quickly and as forcefully as possible. We need to expand efforts to learn from other nations what they do in education so that we can learn and benefit from them. I think all of us agree the best teachers are always students first. I think we've got a lot to learn. We have a lot we can teach, but we have a lot we can learn. Secretary Paige argues that we need to have fuller engagement in education issues in international venues. We need to be there. We need to participate. We need to make sure that the rest of the world knows we want to be engaged wherever we need to be. We need a broader emphasis and exposure for all of America's students in other languages, cultures and challenges. I think you'll see, I know you'll see, as we move into the UNESCO discussions and other things, much more participation by your Department of Education.

But that is a modest thing compared to what you do and that must always be the case, it seems to me. Let me close by saying that none of it is possible without you. Your responsibilities have grown in immeasurable ways in recent years. We would like to shoulder those responsibilities with you. We are looking for new ways to do things we do well. And new ways to do things we have not thought about doing before. As we do that, we will ask hard, as I hope you will ask of us, hard questions and engage in a conversation that can transform America. I think it's possible. Conversations can transform America even as we reaffirm what America is supposed to be all about. Listening as much as lecturing, learning together. This is a time unlike any in our nation's history. Let me close with the title of my comments. There was another time which was unique in this nation's history. It was the period that led up to the creation of the Constitution. That turbulent time between the revolution and America's federation and the new

Constitution, where this nation was struggling to find out who it was going to be. Many would argue, as I would, that that struggle still continues much to our benefit. At that time a physician from Philadelphia, patriot Benjamin Rush, wrote essays about his time. He said, among other things, that this new form of government that we are creating causes a “new class of duties” to be assigned to every citizen in the republic. His point in the essay, which I commend to you, is how one is educated needs to reflect the responsibilities of self-government in the Republic. And he talks about the kind of education that is needed. And he ends up by saying, we need to be about this business seriously because there is so much at stake.

During this unique time in our history, I would like to suggest a new class of duties has been assigned to all of us as teachers, as scholars, as parents, as taxpayers, as responsible decision makers. For those of us engaged in education, there is a special urgency and a great responsibility as well as endless possibilities. Together, let us be about carrying out this new class of duties with energy and wisdom, because as Benjamin Rush said over two hundred years ago, and he was right then and remains right now, “there’s just so much at stake”.

Thank you very much.

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