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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary
(Tulsa, Oklahoma)

For Immediate Release

May 4, 1990

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT OKLAHOMA FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE DINNER

Maxwell Convention Center
Tulsa, Oklahoma

8:08 P.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. And thank you especially, Senator Nickles, for that warm introduction. To Governor Henry Bellmon, early supporter and friend of longstanding; Senator Boren, to whom I give enormous credit for this wonderful evening, and all the principals that lead to this evening and will lead to so much more for academic excellence. And to other distinguished members of the Congress that might be here, especially I want to pay my respects to Carl Albert and Mrs. Albert, who's here; and members of the Foundation, honored guests, and ladies and gentlemen. I'd like the Tulsa Band, too. I thought they did an outstanding job over there. (Applause.)

You'll be pleased, this will be a short speech. I will leave before the broccoli. (Laughter.) Did you see the sign -- did you see the kid over there while I was speaking at Oklahoma State University holding up a sign, "George, eat your broccoli." I don't need advice from little kids about what I'm going to eat. (Laughter.)

But earlier today I gave that speech -- first, just let me say I appreciate this reception very much and am delighted to be in this state of open hearts and open skies. But let me say a word about Oklahoma State. I gave that speech over there at Oklahoma State University, and I was delighted to be there, at Stillwater. They'll never forgive me in Norman. After all, the musical "Oklahoma" says "the farmer and the cowman should be friends." It doesn't say a thing about the Sooners and Cowboys. (Laughter.)

This evening, though, I want to talk about one thing all Americans have in common, the reason we're all here: our dedication to America's most enduring legacy. I refer, of course, to the education that is vital to everything we are and can become.

It's been said, "There are only two bequests we can hope to give our children -- one of these is roots, and the other, wings." A theme embodied, I might add, in the beautiful sculptures here. These words reaffirm that knowledge provides the foundation for every idea that takes flight in the mind of a child.

Yet today the facts are clear, and they don't make for pleasant reading. Erratic standards -- Dave referred to this -- an unacceptable drop-out rate, too little parental involvement, too little accountability by teachers and students, too many schools wracked by drug use and too many kids ill-equipped to read or write. Let's be honest: our educational system isn't making the grade.

Five years ago, a United States senator acted to convert that grade to "pass" from "fail." Believing, like you, that if excellence breeds achievement, then excellence should be rewarded. So David Boren set out to ensure that future generations will say of us: They taught their children well. His creation was the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence.

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This Foundation wisely believes that America can only be as great as her children are educated. And that while the federal government must help, education is and should be a local and a state responsibility. Parents, teachers, local administrators -- not faraway, distant bureaucrats -- best understand the local needs. So this program here affirms values as central to Oklahoma as love of freedom and of God.

First of all, the Foundation reflects Oklahoma's belief in high achievement. Someone said, "Anything can have happened in Oklahoma. Practically everything has." Your work has raised private money to give \$1,000 cash scholarships to the state's top 100 high school seniors. And I loved seeing those kids march across this stage just a minute ago. I salute these academic all-staters who are the true trustees of our posterity.

Next, this Foundation mirrors your dedication, Oklahoma's dedication to excellence. You understand that those with the responsibility for our children's education literally hold the future in their hands. So you're giving \$5,000 each to three magnificent teachers and a superb public school administrator. I salute the recipients of the 1990 Oklahoma Medals for Excellence in Teaching and Administration. (Applause.) And I also want to mention that \$5,000 award to the public school system that has had the most effective drop-out prevention program. Keeping kids in schools is absolutely critical -- and you're doing a great job.

Finally, the Foundation for Excellence reflects the belief that education can be the great uplifter and equalizer. Perhaps that great Broadway character, Oklahoma's Aunt Eller, put it best when she said, "I don't say I'm better than anybody else, but I'll be danged if I ain't just as good." Well, your idea can enrich education and help education enrich our lives.

Achievement, excellence and equality -- what a definition of Oklahoma. And I love the button that Henry Bellmon gave me here -- Oklahoma, state of excellence. What a wonderful signal that sends to everybody here and all that come here. And what a magnificent difference this movement has made in just five years. Over \$2 million raised. Today, more than 100 Oklahoma communities have local private foundations -- many inspired by your lead. Think of it: Each of these foundations -- I call them "points of light" -- each does what the federal government cannot do -- serve as a wonderful model for other states and localities to emulate. So tonight I challenge every state in America to do what Oklahoma has already done -- make American education a beacon of excellence. (Applause.) By increasing private support for public education, you've enriched academic opportunities for students all across this state. If there's any doubt, you've resolved it. When it comes to Oklahoma education, Washington doesn't know best, Oklahomans do.

The result is that today Oklahoma ranks first, per capita, in the number of private foundations. Yet you also know that progress made can't be measured by dollars spent alone. So you're showing how parents, teachers, administrators, school boards can work together to help our kids -- like Oklahoma's fabled pioneers -- discover the unlimited frontiers of learning.

We know, of course, that it won't be easy. Let me recall how once, marking an examination written shortly before Christmas, the noted Yale scholar William Lyon Phelps came across this note: "God only knows the answer to this question. Merry Christmas." Phelps returned the paper with the annotation: "God gets an A. You get an F. Happy New Year." (Laughter.) You remember that?

Yes, of course, education is going to meet roadblocks. But they're obstacles we can overcome. For you're not in this alone. The federal government does have a legitimate role. That's why a year ago we sent to the Congress our Educational Excellence Act,

legislation which can help America out-think, out-work and out-perform any nation, any day of the week.

For instance, we want to create a \$500-million program by 1994 to reward schools that improve the most. And a Magnet Schools of Excellence Program: We believe parents -- not Big Brother -- should decide which public schools their kids attend. Our program will reward schools that cut the drop-out rate; create a National Science Scholars Initiative providing incentive to excel in science, mathematics, and engineering. And recently I signed into law legislation to help schools that are hit the hardest by drug use.

Now, these steps will help our children unlock the future, give them the tools to master the new world of new technologies. And reverse the trend we saw in a recent comparison of 13-year-olds in the United States and five other countries where America placed last in mathematics and near last in science.

Most of all, our Educational Excellence Act can help make American education number one again by achieving the goals that we announced in February with governors like Henry Bellmon. We want U.S. students to be first in math and science by the year 2000, and every American to be skilled and literate. We want every student to start school ready to learn. That means Head Start and it means programs like it. And each school to have an environment where kids can learn. That means making every school drug-free. Finally, we want to see a graduation rate of at least 90 percent with every student competent in important subjects. Like a future graduate -- Erin Amato, a third-grader from Sugarland, Texas -- who recently wrote me this letter:

"Dear President Bush. I have been doing good in school. I made all 'A' honor roll last six weeks and I hope I make it this six weeks also. Do you like rolls? I like rolls but I do not like broccoli." Obviously, a bright kid here. (Laughter.) And then Erin concluded, saying, "I do like carrots. I love Texas."

Let me close with a story that I think this kid would appreciate -- a story about the scholarship that, together, all of us can build. The story goes that physicist James Franck was Professor at Gottingen University in Germany when Robert Oppenheimer, then only 23, was being examined for his doctorate. On emerging from the oral exam, Professor Franck said, "I got out of there just in time. He was beginning to ask me questions."

In coming years, these Academic All-Staters will ask many questions. Questions about their faith and future, why we're here, and what we can become individually and as a nation. How can education supply some answers? The same way this administrator and these teachers have. By embodying the spirit of Oklahoma's past.

Think of the heroes who settled this state. They didn't believe in government by bureaucrat. They believed in themselves. They built homes out of sod, schoolhouses from scratch. Salt Fork, Black Bear, Apache. Dirt floors. Log walls. Often, supplies were limited -- but there were always enough hands. Pitching in. Teaching classes. Fighting off everything from claim-jumpers to bears.

These pioneers dreamed dreams as big as Oklahoma and made their dreams come true. Like us, they knew where the future lay: In their kids, through education. The Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence can help us achieve our dreams. So that future generations will proclaim, as the musical Oklahoma says, American education, "you're doing fine -- OK."

Thank you for this occasion. Good luck to the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. And God bless each and every one of you that cares about our kids. Thank you all very, very much. (Applause.)