

Riley Speeches/Testimony
Testing on V.N.T.
before Specter

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Testimony of Secretary Richard W. Riley before the
Senate Labor, Health & Human Services & Education
Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee
(September 4, 1997)

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you at this very special time of year -- back-to-school time. More students than ever before are in our nation's classrooms -- 52.2 million. And that number is going to keep on growing. If we give all of these young people a quality education, America will remain strong, prosperous, and free.

Education begins with challenging students to do their best. That's why standards are so important -- rigorous standards that encourage students to work hard and stretch their minds. If I could sum up everything I've learned about education in three words, they would be "high standards work." That's because schools and students rise to the expectations we set for them.

I saw this happen again just a couple of days ago when I visited Philadelphia. As you know, Chairman Specter, citywide scores in math, reading, and science are on the rise there in 4th, 8th, and 11th grades. Why? Because Philadelphia is getting serious about standards.

Public education is also doing better in many other places, thanks to tougher standards. But let's not kid ourselves -- we still have a long way to go. Most importantly, we need to make sure that every young American gets a solid foundation in the basics -- reading and math. Reading scores have remained flat for a quarter of a century. And the results of the Third International Math and Science Study -- "TIMSS" -- show that our 8th graders are below the international average in math.

President Clinton and I took a look at all this and decided that we needed to take action. That is why we have proposed rigorous, voluntary national tests in 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math. Philadelphia, along with more than a dozen other major urban areas and seven states, have already agreed to participate. I spoke about these tests before the subcommittee last April, and I am happy to offer the committee more information about them today.

4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math were chosen because these two basic skills are the "make-or-break" points in a child's education. Let's take a look at reading.

Teachers will tell you that students who cannot read independently by the 4th grade often get down on themselves. Poor readers become frustrated, they start falling behind, and they often head down the road to truancy and dropping out. Some even begin to make the wrong choices about drugs. We can save these young people if we identify who needs help, which schools need help, and then give

them the assistance they need.

Now let me talk about math. Our proposal for an 8th-grade math test includes algebra and even some geometry. That's because the vast majority of experts view those subjects as the gateway courses that prepare young people to take college-prep courses in high school. Currently, only 20 percent of our 8th graders take algebra. Yet in many countries, such as Japan, 100 percent of 8th graders take algebra. We've got to close "the Algebra Gap" or our international competitors will move ahead of us.

Our proposal for voluntary national tests is not revolutionary. We are simply taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests one step further. Right now, NAEP does not test all students, and it provides no information at all on individual students, schools, or districts.

We want to change that and that is why I call the new national tests a "personalized version of NAEP" because they will test individual students in participating schools or states. These tests will tell parents, teachers, policy makers, and students about what it takes to reach national and even international standards of achievement -- something no other test currently does.

Equally important, these tests will use the rigorous NAEP frameworks and hold students to high standards. That doesn't always happen with other tests. I have attached a chart to my testimony that illustrates this point. You can see that on some state tests, students appear to be doing high-level, proficient work. But students don't do as well when measured against NAEP's high standards of excellence. This means that some parents are being told that their children are doing "A" level work, when in reality they're only getting a "C" education. Voluntary national tests, linked to high standards, will give parents and teachers a much clearer, more realistic picture of how their children are doing.

Perhaps most important of all, these tests will get the whole country buzzing. They already have. I think I've heard more discussion about education in the last 6 months than I've ever heard, and that's the way to make bottom-up change happen. The American people are ready for this. The latest Gallup Poll found that two out of three Americans say that national tests would improve student achievement "a great deal or quite a lot."

Now, I know that some in the Congress and elsewhere have expressed concern about the tests. The President and I have moved to address these concerns. First, let me reiterate that the tests are voluntary. No state or school will be required to offer these tests as a condition of receiving federal funding.

Second, there is ample authority to fund development and use of the tests under the Fund for the Improvement of Education, authorized by Section 1010 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This statute expressly authorizes the Secretary of Education to support "nationally significant programs and projects to improve

the quality of education". F.I.E. and similar previous authorities have been used by the U. S. Department of Education under both Republican and Democratic Administrations for a wide range of national and local activities similar to this initiative.

Third, the Administration transmitted legislation to Congress yesterday which would authorize an already established, independent, bipartisan board to oversee the tests -- the National Assessment Governing Board, or "NAGB." We urge the Congress to pass this legislation without delay.

Fourth, these tests are not part of any attempt to create a national curriculum. Individual test scores will not be collected by the federal government. States and school districts will have control over the results, and they are designed to help teachers, principals, school boards, and parents to shape their own curricula.

Fifth, there are some who say the tests will be too difficult for children in our poorer schools. Yes, richer schools may have advantages, but effort and commitment to excellence matter more. The fastest way to turn eager young students into 16-year-old drop-outs is to expect too little of them and dumb down their education.

Process and other issues are important, but let's keep our eye on the prize. This morning, Jim Orr of the UNUM Corporation and chairman of the National Alliance of Business issued a statement that said it best. He said, "There is certainly a place for legitimate discussion over details... But these and other arguments should not weaken or overshadow our commitment to raising academic standards and assessing student performance. Without a national assessment, raising academic standards will be, at best, an amorphous goal."

Mr. Chairman, there is a movement in the Congress now that would deny states and school districts the right to choose whether they want to offer these tests. Yesterday, the executive director of the National Association of State School Boards wrote a letter to members of Congress which said, "We believe the states should be afforded the opportunity to decide for themselves whether to take part in these national assessments."

I heartily agree with that view. And I believe it is time to get serious about education. These tests will help mobilize the American people in a great national effort to raise reading and math achievement. Because this is so important for our country, I see it as a great patriotic cause. Let us move forward into the 21st century with high standards -- and let's make sure we meet them.

Thank you very much.