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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
ABOUT THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Ballou Senior High School
Washington, D.C.

11:35 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Now, all of you sitting out here in this audience, you know, some of us speak in public for a living; others don't. I thought Darnell was terrific. Didn't you think he did a good job? (Applause.)

I am so glad to be here today with all of you at Ballou Senior High School. I thank the band for playing for us earlier today -- I thought you all did a great job. (Applause.) And I thank Dr. Durham and Dr. Bridges for welcoming me here and for giving me a track and field jacket, which I will wear happily. (Applause.) I thank the students who met me.

I want to say a special word of thanks to the Chairman and CEO of America On-Line, Steve Case; and for Epic Learning's President, David Sterling. I thank them for what they said here today and for the commitment they have to giving you and young people like you all over this country a chance to live your dreams by making sure you have access to the technological future that ought to be within reach of every American. They don't have to do this; they're doing this because they know it is the right thing to do. And I thank them for being here. (Applause.)

I want to talk a little today about what our job is in the government, what my job as President is, what Washington's job should be, to make sure that we can have more stories like the ones I saw from the students today that Darnell introduced me to. And I want to thank all the students that showed me what they were doing to either repair or to work with computers. But nothing that the President proposes that costs any money can be done unless the Congress goes along. And there is an enormous amount of interest in the United States Congress today in both parties, in both the Senate and the House, to do something about this.

And there is a big delegation from Congress here, so I want to introduce them. I'd like to ask them to stand, and I hope you will express your appreciation to them. First of all, Senator Bob Bennett, from Utah, who headed our Y2K efforts in the Congress. Thank you, sir. (Applause.) Congresswoman Maxine Waters from California. (Applause.) Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee from Texas. (Applause.) Congressman Bill Jefferson from Louisiana. (Applause.) Congressman Adam Smith from Washington. (Applause.) Congresswoman Ellen Tauscher from California. (Applause.) Congressman David Wu from Oregon. (Applause.) And your representative in Congress, Eleanor Holmes Norton. Thank you. (Applause.)

Did I miss anybody? And I want to thank your wonderful Mayor, who was once a member of our administration, Mayor Anthony Williams. Stand up, there. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

I want to just mention a couple of other people. First of all, thank you, Superintendent Ackerman, for welcoming me. I want to thank Harris Wofford, who is the head of the AmeriCorps program, and Vista. The AmeriCorps-Vista volunteers are working to help solve this problem of the digital divide all over America. They're young people who are going back into our schools, going back into our community, helping people who otherwise wouldn't have a chance, and earning some money themselves for college. Some of you might want to consider joining AmeriCorps when you get out of high school.

Stand up, Senator Wofford. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

I want to thank Angela Lee from AT&T and Julie Evans from NetDay for the work they have done to help connect all of our schools to the Internet. I want to thank three people in our administration -- Gene Sperling, my National Economic Advisor, who has worked so hard on this; Secretary Daley, who is speaking in Harlem on this issue today; and I want to thank Vice President Gore for reasons I'll say in a moment, but he had a great deal to do with what we have been able to accomplish over the last six years.

I just got a wonderful tour from Darnell, and a chance to learn how technology is enhancing your educational mission. And as Steve Case said, it will only increase when you become one of these power-up sites. I learned every freshman is taking a computer literacy class. I learned students are going on-line to get help with their homework and learn what they need to do to prepare for college. I learned that you can chat in foreign languages with people around the world and work on projects with scientists from our Naval Research Lab.

I was particularly pleased to learn about Epic Learning's long-term commitment to help students toward certificates in high-tech careers, and about the way companies

like 3M, AT&T and Cisco, along with the AFL-CIO, are working to give you additional hardware, software, and teacher training.

One thing that I think may be a down side from the students' point of view -- it occurred to me when I was driving through the snow today -- is that once we get everybody wired, you'll still have to go to school even when you can't get here, because you can just go on the Internet. (Laughter.) But I think it's worth the sacrifice to give you a better future

I wanted to say to you -- to give you some examples. When we talk about bridging the digital divide, what do we mean? We mean that everybody ought to have access to a computer; everybody ought to have access to the Internet; everybody ought to know how to use it and then we ought to make it possible for people to make the maximum use of it. I want to just give you some examples of what this incredibly profound change in our society has wrought in individual lives.

Victor Shen is a high school junior in Whittier, Alaska. He dreams of becoming a professional mathematician, but he lives in a small school in our largest but most rural state. So his school doesn't offer college-level calculus. His town is so remote that he's cut off from the whole rest of the world for several months every winter. But he will soon have the chance to take the classes he needs to pursue his dream of becoming a mathematician by getting on-line. It wouldn't be there.

It ought to be there for every person like him, in every rural area and every inner-city neighborhood in the entire United States of America. There are lots of Victor Shens out there. There are people in this high school who could become professional mathematicians, professional scientists. There are people like you in every community in this country -- no one should be shut out of this. (Applause.)

Listen to this. Two years ago, a man named Clinton Johnson lost his little bakery on 125th street in Harlem in New York City. He had no savings to support his wife and two children. But he found a community technology center near his home, learned HTML code and got himself a good job as a web developer.

Dale O'Reilley, a grandmother of two from Medford, New Jersey, was diagnosed nine years ago with Lou Gehrig's Disease. Now, even though she can no longer move or speak, a special laptop computer allows her to give voice to her thoughts, and she continues to write newspaper articles for the Philadelphia Inquirer. (Applause.)

The areas in America with the highest unemployment are our Native American reservations. I visited last year the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the home of the Oglala Sioux. The unemployment rate there is over 70 percent.

We're all looking for new ways for them to find things to do. They have very gifted artists and crafts and making Native American products. This year, I ordered Christmas gifts from the Pine Ridge reservation over the Internet. They would never be able to market their products across this nation -- never, ever. They wouldn't have the money to do it. But because they have a web page, people like us can find them and help them to build their dreams. (Applause.)

And before we came out here, I was talking to Steve about -- I spent some time a few months ago with the executive of E-Bay out in Northern California. Some of you may have found E-Bay on the Net. It's a trading site. And the company's gone like crazy, because people love to buy and sell things. It's like an old-fashioned community like the farmers' market used to be in my hometown on Saturday morning. And people buy and sell all kinds of things on E-Bay. There are now over 20,000 Americans making a living, not working for E-Bay, but buying and selling on the site, and many of them used to be on welfare. They found a way through the Net to empower themselves through their minds to have a different future.

Now, this is just the beginning. We have only scratched the surface. Imagine what it will be like when every single child in this country can just stretch a hand across a keyboard and pull up every book ever written, every painting ever created, every symphony or jazz piece ever composed. When high-speed wireless networks bring distant learning and telemedicine to every rural area in this country. When even the smallest business can compete worldwide just because they have access to people across the world through the Net.

This is the future we are trying to build. In 1994, when Vice President Gore and I sponsored the first NetDay to begin to hook all of our schools and all of our classrooms up to the Internet, only 3 percent of the classrooms in America were wired. Since then, the public and the private sectors, through generous grants, through NetDays, volunteer work, and through the steep discounts that schools can get in access charges, thanks to the so-called e-rate, which the Vice President pioneered -- since then, we've gone from 3 percent of our classrooms connected to over half of our classrooms connected. And 90 percent of the schools in the United States today have at least one connection to the Internet. That's a big step forward, and I'm proud of that. (Applause.)

But as you have already heard, there is still a big digital divide in this country. And it runs through income first -- low-income families are far less likely to have access to the Internet and computers. There is also, for reasons we don't entirely understand, there is a separate racial and ethnic component to it. Among low-income families, African American and

Hispanic families are less likely than other low-income families to have computers and to be hooked up to the Internet.

We also know that people who live in rural areas, regardless of their race, are far, far less likely to own computers, and to be wired to the Net -- even though they, in some ways, need it more than anybody else because of their physical isolation. And that this is most pronounced in Indian country in the United States.

Eventually this digital divide will deprive businesses of the workers they need. That's why I was so glad to see people training here, to learn how to use and to repair computers. It could also widen inequality in our society between people, based on who's connected and who's not.

Now, at a time when our country has the longest economic expansion in history and the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, and the lowest minority unemployment rates ever recorded, we must close the digital divide. We have worked too hard to turn this country around and to get it going in the right direction, to let all this generation of young people wind up with greater inequality, when we have a chance to have greater equality of opportunity in America than ever in our history. (Applause.)

Some of you may know that I have been going around America holding what I call New Markets tours, to make the argument that with all the prosperity of the country, now is the time to recognize and be honest about the fact that not every community has felt the economic prosperity of the last few years, and that is our obligation, to bring economic opportunity to all the neighborhoods, and all the rural areas, and all the Indian reservations, where they don't know there has been a recovery because it hasn't changed their lives. If we don't do it now, we will never get around to doing this. Now is the time to do it.

In April, I am going to lead one of these New Markets tours, focused only on this issue -- closing the digital divide. What can we do to have the kind of stories I saw in your classroom today and every classroom and every neighborhood, among every group in every community in the United States? And I've asked Congress to help me. And I want to talk a little bit about what I think our job is.

First of all, we ought to have a goal -- I believe in having big goals. If you have big goals and you work towards them, even if you don't quite get there, you look around and you find you've come a long way. If you don't have big goals, you don't get much done. What should our big goal be? Our big goal should be to make connection to the Internet as common as connection to telephones is today. That's what our big goal ought to be. (Applause.)

And I think we should start by making sure that every community has a technology center that serves not just young people, but adults as well. (Applause.) Yes, you can clap for that -- that's all right. (Applause.) I don't want to take credit for this. We started doing this two years ago because Congresswoman Maxine Waters from California, who is here today, who was then chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, brought this idea to our attention. She said, you ought to have community technology centers everywhere for the adults, for the people who aren't in the schools. They need access to this, too.

These centers were working so well that we tripled our investment in them last year. And I have given Congress a budget that will triple our investment in them again so we can have 1,000 community centers with computers serving the adults of America who otherwise would not have access to them. Thank you very much, Congresswoman Waters, and I hope we can pass it. (Applause.)

Second, we want to join with the private sector to bring more computers and Internet access into the homes of low-income people. Public-spirited members of the high-tech community have already helped us -- pledged to help us on this. I know of at least two places in America where there is a serious program, thanks to the private sector, not only to hook up all the classrooms, but to give more low-income students' parents computers in their homes and make sure they know how to e-mail the school, and keep working back and forth on the homework, on the progress of life in school. (Applause.)

In one of these districts in particular, in New Jersey, where a lot of the students are first-generation immigrants whose parents' main language is not English, there has been an explosion in student performance, in part because the Net has enabled the parents who are working all day, who are busy, who hardly have enough money to support their children, but because they're connected, they can be directly involved through e-mail in their children's education. It made a big difference. And we need to recognize that as much as we can do with the community centers, which we ought to do now, eventually we're going to have to give home access to low-income people just like the rest of us have, and I think we should be working on it. (Applause.)

Third thing I want to do is to ask Congress to give private companies a couple of billion dollars -- that's a lot of money -- in tax incentives to get them to build and support these community technology centers, donate quality computers and provide computer training.

Fourth, I want to do more to give -- this is a big issue -- I bet you notice this here; I bet some teachers know this -- we must do more to give quality technology training to all of our new teachers in America, to make sure they're as good with computers as they are with textbooks. You can have all the computers in the world, and if the kids know more about it than

the teachers -- which is often the case, at least, if they're as technologically challenged as I have been in my life -- we'll be behind.

Why should we expect teachers, who did not grow up in the computer age, to just know everything they should know to teach the kids everything they can teach to maximize this? We should do more. We owe it to the teachers of this country to give them all the training they need to maximize all this hardware and software that we're doing our best to put at their fingertips, and at the use of their students. (Applause.)

Next thing we need to do is bring high-speed networks to underserved communities. Businesses are looking for high-speed Internet access when they consider new sites. One of the problems I've got in trying to convince people that, even with tax incentives, they ought to go to isolated areas is, they don't have high-speed Internet access, and time is money. So it's very important to do that.

And finally, we want to triple our investment in our Commerce Department's Technology Opportunity Program, to create innovative applications of technology for all low-income communities. For example, we want to have health information systems that raise childhood immunization rates in inner cities. We want to have mentoring for at-risk youth that can be done via the Internet. We believe there are a lot of things that can be done to lift the lives of low-income people, and to bring benefits to them that normally aren't there, if we just think about it and we give people the tools who live in these communities to think about it and find ways to maximize their future.

It would be a terrible irony of our time if these tools, these information revolutionary tools that are breaking down barriers all over the world -- and I'll just give you one more fact -- when I became President -- now, to the kids, this seems like a long time ago, but for the adults, it won't be -- when I became President seven years and two weeks ago, there were 50 -- 50 sites on the Worldwide Web -- 50. Today, there are over 50 million. And it's the fastest-growing means of communication in history by far. Nothing even comes close.

And as a result, I told somebody the other day -- you know, I come from a small town in rural Arkansas, and I've got a cousin that plays chess once or twice a week with a guy in Australia. I mean, it's unbelievable. This is the kind of things that's going on. This tool is breaking down barriers between nations and cultures, and enabling us to come together, and it's opening up all these wonderful opportunities. It would be a tragedy if we allowed this instrument that is also breaking down barriers to build up new barriers to people living their dreams simply because they didn't have access to it. That's what this whole thing is about.

There are kids in this gym today who, in a former time, might never have been able to even think about getting an education in some sort of esoteric technology or scientific subject that will see something on the web that will spark your interest, and that you will then be able to pursue, could change your whole life. It would be wrong for you not to have that opportunity.

There are people here today who will understand that they can use this tool to make a living and to create economic opportunity in this part of Washington, D.C. that's never been there. It would be wrong for you not to have that opportunity. There are people here today who can find out information about things that already exist.

I saw -- one young woman was looking at the questions she should ask in going to college. Every one of you should know that already on the books, we have passed tax credits, scholarships and loans so that at least two years of college is affordable to everybody in America now. I don't care how poor you are. And if the Congress passes the legislation before them now, four years of college will be affordable to everybody in America, I don't care what your income is. You need to know that. (Applause.)

And it will be tragic if this instrument, that has done more to break down barriers between people than anything in all of human history, built a new wall because not everybody had access to it. That's what this whole deal's about.

Steve Case and I were talking when Darnell was up here talking, and he said, you know, I'm not little anymore, and he did that sort of, oh, shucks, routine, you know? (Laughter.) I told Steve Case, I said, boy, he is really good. (Laughter.) And Steve said, yes, I'm glad I don't have to follow him. (Laughter.) I want every American to have a story like Darnell's. And this tool means that we don't have to give up on anybody. We don't have to leave anybody behind. We can all go forward together in the most exciting age this country has ever known. And we're here to tell you we will do our best to make sure you go.

And I want to close, as Mr. Case did, by saying, it doesn't matter what technology you put before you -- to the students -- if you don't do your part. You've still got to be able to read. You've still got to be curious enough to want to learn. You've still got to be disciplined enough to be willing to work. But if you get your heart and your mind engaged, there should be no barrier to letting you live your dreams tomorrow. And we're going to do our best to take the barriers down.

Thank you, and God bless you. (Applause.)

END

12:01 P.M. EST