

**Remarks for Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
National PTA Legislative Conference
Washington, DC
March 9, 2011**

Good morning. I'd like to thank Chuck for that introduction and welcome all of you to Washington.

Like many of us, Chuck started as a volunteer at his local PTA. Then he became president of the school's PTA. Then president of the South Carolina PTA. Now he's the national president of the PTA. I've had the chance to meet with Chuck and he's a great example of the type of person who makes PTA such a positive force in kids' lives. And as the first man to head the PTA, he's also a great model for fathers around the country.

In this Administration, we believe that nothing is more important to our future than the opportunities we give our children. We are at our strongest and most competitive as a nation when every child has the chance to reach his and her full potential.

That's why President Obama has made educating our children a central part of his plan to win the future. Under Secretary Duncan's leadership, we've undertaken one of the most ambitious efforts to improve K through 12 education in history with the goal of giving every child the opportunity to graduate high school ready for a career, further training, or college. Working with groups like the PTA, we're bringing a new level of rigor to the goal of making America's schools the best in the world.

But as you know, learning doesn't start at age five. And a world-class education can't start in Kindergarten.

The best science tells us that the first five years of a child's life are among the most important for healthy brain development. So it's no surprise that early childhood education has been shown to be one of the best investments we can make.

Earlier this year, we got the results of the latest study to look at the value of early education. Researchers followed children from low income families enrolled in a Chicago early education program until they turned 26. They found that over a child's lifetime, the program generated as much as \$11 in economic benefits for every dollar spent.

That enormous payoff is why this Administration has made a historic investment in early childhood education, starting with the economic stimulus bill signed by President Obama

in 2009, the Recovery Act. As part of that law, we were able to provide new funds to help Head Start and Early Head Start add over 4,000 classrooms to serve approximately 60,000 more children.

We also invested in child care programs, allowing states to support an estimated 300,000 children and sparking new investments in quality even during an economic downturn.

And even with the President's proposed five year freeze, bringing discretionary spending to the lowest share of our economy since Dwight Eisenhower was President, the President's 2012 budget would continue these smart investments that help us out-educate, out-innovate and out-build our global competition.

We live in an age where many of the fastest growing jobs can be done anywhere there's a laptop and an internet connection. That means we can't out-compete the world unless we also out-educate the world. And we can't out-educate the world if our children start school at a disadvantage.

But we're not just investing more resources in our early childhood system. We're also putting a new focus on quality.

As you all know, we've been talking about quality outcomes in K-16 education for years. But there's no reason quality should matter more for your 14-year-old than for your 4-year-old.

In Head Start, we've proposed new rules that would require the lowest performing programs – the bottom twenty five percent - to re-compete for continued funding. This will ensure that the best programs are the ones serving our children. We've also revamped the training we provide to Head Start directors and teachers to make sure we're getting best practices into the classroom.

And our budget calls for important reforms in child care programs that would raise the bar on quality. Child care makes work possible for millions of families, but we need a child care system that is a child development system, not just babysitting.

So our reform agenda would promote better health and safety standards, put more information about the quality of different child care options into parents' hands, and improve workforce training to make sure that the people who are caring for our kids have the skills they need.

The President's 2012 budget also establishes an innovative Early Learning Challenge Fund.

Under the Challenge Fund states will compete for \$350 million in funding to make comprehensive improvements across their early learning programs. States will use money to improve their early education workforce, create rating systems to help parents choose the best programs, and improve offerings for children with disabilities and English learners. And as they compete for funds, the quality of early childhood education will rise across the country.

Taken together, these initiatives are designed to create an early learning system that gets every child ready for school, supports healthy child development, and features high standards whether a child is in a public pre-K program, a Head Start center, a child care center, or a family day care home.

Each of these programs also recognizes that a child's first and best teachers are parents. At the PTA, you've seen firsthand how involving parents in school decisions can lead to better results. We've made that lesson a fundamental component of each of these programs.

Giving all of our children the opportunity to develop the skills to be ready for school is a Presidential priority. It's been a priority of mine since I came into the Legislature as a mother of a two-year-old and five-year-old. And we're committed to working with groups like PTA to make sure all our children can start school ready to learn.

But our work to help kids reach their full potential can't stop when they leave the classroom. As parents know, kids need a lot more to reach their full potential, including access to affordable health care. Kids can't succeed if their illnesses go undiagnosed and untreated. But, today, more than 7 million American children have no health insurance, children whose parents ask "can we afford this?" before scheduling a doctor's appointment. That's simply unacceptable.

Even more unacceptable is that most of those children are eligible for health insurance, through the Children's Health Insurance Program or Medicaid. They just aren't signed up.

That's why last year I issued the "Connecting Kids to Coverage Challenge." I'm calling on Governors, Mayors, school officials, pediatricians, faith groups, community organizations, and other partners around the country to find these kids and get them enrolled in health insurance. And today, I'm asking the PTA to redouble your efforts to get every eligible child signed up.

Schools have been leading the way in this effort. They are working with their coaches, school nurses, school lunch programs, teachers and parents to help enroll eligible children and keep them covered for as long as they qualify. We've made grants available to schools and groups, like the PTA, to boost these efforts.

There is so much all of you can do and I know many of you already are engaged. To find out more about how you can step up to the Challenge and help get children enrolled in health coverage, visit our website insurekidsnow.gov. Together, we can make sure no child goes without the medicine or checkup or vaccine that they need.

And now, thanks to some important provisions in the health reform law, the Affordable Care Act, that job is a lot easier.

For example, it's now illegal for insurance companies to deny coverage to a child just because they have a pre-existing health condition like asthma or diabetes. And parents finally have peace of mind because the law now allows our children to stay in a family health plan up to age 26, if they don't get coverage through a job.

This is vital because one of the most vulnerable groups of Americans in our old health insurance system was young adults.

I saw this firsthand with my two sons, John and Ned. When they graduated college, they were both able to find jobs. But neither of their employers offered insurance.

Fortunately, they were healthy and had the resources to buy coverage. But not all Americans are that lucky. Now, families will have the security of knowing their children can get health insurance as they begin their careers.

By making it easier for our children to get the health care they need, we can help them thrive.

But we all know that the health of our kids is not just about what happens in the doctor's office. At a time when one in three American children is overweight or obese - four times what it was 40 years ago - we also need to make sure they're getting exercise and eating right.

That's what the First Lady's Let's Move campaign is all about. She's set a goal of eliminating childhood obesity in a generation, and she's recruited partners across the country from grocers to sports teams to food producers to schools.

At the same time, we're supporting state and community initiatives that give children more access to healthy foods, increase the amount of exercise they get in schools, and create safe environments for children to walk, run and play.

And the President signed a new school nutrition bill that updated nutrition standards for school breakfast and lunch programs. We started with the fact that ketchup is not a vegetable and we went from there.

We need you to be a part of these efforts. We need your help to sign up kids for health coverage. We need your help to get the word out to your neighborhoods that families have new rights and protections under the health care law. We need your help to make sure that children are running through parks, instead of flipping through channels. We need your help to make sure our school cafeterias are serving healthy food.

No matter how much progress we make in education, if our children aren't healthy outside the classroom, they are not going to thrive inside the classroom.

And we won't improve our kids' lives just by writing laws in Washington. This has to be a partnership. And the nation's Parent Teacher Association is a powerful partner to have.

Because ultimately, no one is more important to our children's success than their parents.

Over the course of our child's life, all of us are teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, best friends, good cops and bad cops to our kids. But one of the best things we can do is set an example for them to be great parents. And that has to start from an early age.

That's why our department is partnering with the PTA on a Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. You're going to hear more about this program later today. Its focus is on early education programs that help parents and children build stronger bonds, helping families succeed so kids can succeed.

This could be help acquiring basic services, like affordable housing. Or it could be help developing skills so a parent can be an advocate during their child's transition into public school.

We're also following your lead on a goal that the PTA has been pursuing for years through your "Million Hours of Power" initiative - encouraging fathers to take larger roles in their children's lives.

Our 2012 budget includes a Child Support and Fatherhood initiative that will mean that more child support actually reaches children. When fathers know that their support is

going right to children, they are more likely to pay. But this initiative isn't just about financial support, it's also about helping fathers engage with their children to become partners in parenting. It's about children getting the emotional and financial support of both parents that is so vital to their development

Our vision is one in which every child has access to a high quality early education program, then transitions smoothly to a high quality K through 12 school system, and then graduates prepared for college or a career. To be successful, every child should get the health care, diet, and exercise they need to grow up healthy and strong, and parents should have the support they need to be the best possible parents to their children.

This vision is a Presidential priority; it's also a priority of mine. And it is a key component in our effort to win the future and lead the world in this century, as we did in the last. We've taken some important steps in the last two years, but we won't achieve our goals without the support and partnership of groups like the PTA. Together, we can build on our progress and give every American child the chance to make the most of their abilities.

Thank you.