

Office of the Governor

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NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Addresses NJ PTA, Stressing Involvement and Leadership for the Youngest Members of New Jersey's Family

Stressing the need to help New Jersey's children become strong, educated, violence free members of New Jersey's family, Governor Whitman today addressed some of the people vital in making that happen, members of New Jersey's PTA.

The Governor told members they play an important role in supporting excellence in the education system and also the need to keep parents involved in their children's learning process.

While addressing the group, the Governor highlighted FANS, "Families Achieving the New Standards", a program that educates parents about the core curriculum standards their kids are now being held to in New Jersey's schools. In addition, the Governor spoke about recent violence in schools and talked about New Jersey's V-Free program, geared at empowering students to keep violence out of their lives.

Another initiative undertaken by the Governor and mentioned in her remarks is the NJ BEST program, a federal tax deferred and state tax exempt savings program for college education.

Attached is a copy of the Governor's remarks.

REMARKS OF GOVERNOR CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN 99TH ANNUAL NEW JERSEY PTA CONVENTION ATLANTIC CITY WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1999

Thank you, Syvonne (Forkin), for that introduction.

I want to thank all of you for the time and talent you invest in making New Jersey schools better. Your work captures the PTA spirit of supporting excellence in education and keeping parents at the center of a child's life and learning.

Clearly, each of you cares deeply about kids. So let me suggest a great holiday gift idea for your children or for any youngsters you love. It doesn't need batteries, it doesn't require assembly, it doesn't involve PokNon, and it's a good fit even after a growth spurt.

I'm talking about the gift of a college savings account through the NJ BEST program. For as little as 25 dollars a month, you can set aside money for a youngster's college education, with federal tax deferred and no state taxes

whatsoever on the earnings. My staff has placed brochures on the tables so you can learn more about NJ BEST.

I am glad for this opportunity to speak with you on the first day of the last month of possibly the final year of the millennium, depending on how you define it. Whether the 21st century begins in 31 days or 13 months, our children will need a first-rate education to enjoy productive, successful lives in that century. Indeed, the attention we give education will determine in large measure whether New Jersey becomes an even better place to live, work, and raise a family.

With that in mind, I want to talk to you today about three F- words. Now, if you think I'm going to use obscenities, don't worry. My talk will be about New Jersey's progress in regard to each of these F-words: FANS, facilities, and fisticuffs.

I hope that most if not all of you are familiar with FANS. FANS stands for Families Achieving the New Standards, and I appreciate the PTA's role in helping us set up and run this program. Our workshops have given thousands of parents an up- close-and-personal view of what we are asking their children to know and do. Most important, the workshops show parents ways to become better partners in their kids' school careers.

So far, the FANS project has centered on science and math standards. But as Commissioner Hespe announced earlier this fall, FANS will expand next year to focus on the core standards for world languages and language arts.

It's vital that we give parents the tools to support what our schools are doing. The process of learning is a three-way partnership among a student, a teacher, and a parent. We can't afford to cut parents out of the partnership; if anything, we need to strengthen that partnership.

FANS is helping parents help children. It's also showing parents that we are serious about improving schools. I'd stack up our new academic standards against those of any other state in the country.

Just the other day, in fact, I received the framework for the new social studies curriculum. This is impressive stuff. High school students will compare and contrast American slavery with Russian serfdom. Sixth- and seventh-graders will learn about export balances and imbalances. Younger students will investigate the states in the Appalachian Mountain region and discover how the mountains have affected the lives of the people now and in the past.

Learning these lessons is going to help our children gain the jobs and pursue the careers we want for them. What's more, it will help them take their places as informed and involved citizens.

When we talk about expecting a first-class education from our schools, we shouldn't have to send our kids to third-rate buildings to receive that education. That's where the second F- word comes in: facilities.

Many schools in New Jersey were built during the baby boom. Just like baby boomers, these buildings are showing their age. Across the state, communities

are facing big decisions about repairs, renovations, and replacements.

As you know, the Legislature is debating how to help finance school construction in school districts across the state. You also know that the State Supreme Court has required the State to pay for needed construction in the Abbott districts.

I'm not here to discuss how many square feet per student is enough, whether the State should pay for school stadiums, or the like. The Legislature still must work out many details before the bill reaches my desk.

Let me say, however, that I remain committed to significant state support so our kids can learn in safe, secure buildings. The construction proposal I made earlier this year was truly unprecedented. Never before has state government made such an ambitious commitment to school infrastructure.

In fact, I don't know of another state that is considering the level of funding that we are. New Jersey is once again going to lead the nation.

We will always need money for bricks and mortar. We will always need the involvement of parents. Sadly, we may always have to confront another reality: that violence has become a concern of every school.

It's naive to think that school children aren't going to get angry with each other or have their differences. Every school has always had to deal with fighting. Gone are the days, however, when fisticuffs - the third F-word - were the worst violence our students might face.

The images of Littleton will never leave us. No matter how safe our schools may be, parents will always fear that the next tragedy will occur not somewhere else or to someone else's child but to theirs. This fear will always exist - I recognize that - but I believe we must do all we can to allay it.

As you know, over the past several years people in our state have worked hard to prevent youth violence. We've established gun-free school zones and a zero-tolerance-for-weapons policy to make a stand against those who would endanger our children.

With help from the Violence Institute at UMDNJ, we have created "tip sheets" to help parents and teachers who ask, "what patterns of behavior should I look for?" and "what should I do when a student shows potentially violent tendencies?"

This fall, we took another step in the effort to protect students. The initiative is called V-Free. V-Free means violence-free, victimization-free, and vandalism-free. We are empowering young people to create a violence-free atmosphere in their schools and neighborhoods.

We are encouraging students at every school to take a formal pledge to remain violence-free. Through small grants, we are helping young people who want to start a v-free program but need money for printing, postage, or running an event.

Most important, V-Free includes a new, confidential, toll-free tipline. The tipline is a number to call if there is imminent danger of violence - for example, if a student hears someone say he or she is going to bring a gun to school.

We're not trying to replace the ability every young person already possesses to alert a parent, a teacher, or another responsible adult. But if a youngster doesn't feel comfortable talking about a situation to one of these adults, we always want to provide a place to go.

We all have a part to play in preventing youth violence: parents, first and foremost; teachers and administrators; members of law enforcement and government; and children themselves. In this effort, communication is our best weapon.

I may be preaching to the choir here, but I can't emphasize enough that parents must talk with their children and, even more important, listen to them. By the same token, students must keep open the lines of communication with family, with teachers, and with other students. And we all need to know what to do when youth violence threatens us or our communities.

Preventing violence is part of a larger issue - that of personal responsibility. We have to pursue an ethic of personal responsibility and respect in our schools, in our homes, in our workplaces.

We have to set the example. We can't rail against school violence as we cut off the driver in the next lane. We can't rage against prejudice but let a friend's racist joke go unchallenged. And we shouldn't be shocked that students cheat on tests if we do some creative accounting as we file our taxes.

I began by talking about the FANS program and finished with V-Free. It all comes back to this: whether we're helping our son write his first essay or teaching our daughter not to strike another child, the lessons we teach our children at home are invaluable. A parent's role as educator, mentor, and example should never be underestimated. Remember that the family room is every bit as critical to a child's intellectual and moral development as the classroom.

I think of New Jersey as one family with many faces. Everyone has dignity; everyone deserves respect. What's more, we all have something to contribute to making this state a better place. And there is no doubt that one of the most significant and lasting contributions we can make is to raise our children well.

Keep up the great work you are doing for all of New Jersey's children.

Thank you.