

## Office of the Governor

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### NEWS RELEASE

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RELEASE: December 2, 1998

#### **Governor Whitman Addresses Parent-Teacher Association, Says Children Need Personal Responsibility**

Gov. Christie Whitman today told the statewide convention of the Parent-Teacher Association that children in every school district - from the wealthiest to the neediest - need to learn the importance of personal responsibility.

"As important as it is to learn about trigonometry and Shakespeare, about electromagnetic waves and the Vietnam War, the vitality of our nation and this state absolutely depends on citizens taking responsibility," Gov. Whitman said. "Freedom doesn't work without responsibility. The Bill of Rights becomes irrelevant if we claim our rights but ignore our responsibilities."

The Governor urged parents to be positive role models for their children, so that others do not serve as powerful negative influences.

"Insurance companies tell clients never to admit fault in an accident, no matter how clearly they were the cause of it. Commercials advertise liposuction for men who want to shed that spare tire - never mind that too much food and too little exercise created it. A basketball star chokes his coach and then sues the league, portraying himself as some sort of victim," the Governor told the parents.

Gov. Whitman said there is encouraging proof that parents can make a difference in their children's lives. According to studies cited by the Governor:

- Kids whose parents read to them are better prepared for school and more likely to do well.
- Children whose parents talked to them about drugs by the 6th grade were 57 percent less likely to smoke pot than those whose parents waited until 7th or 8th grade.
- There is a correlation between teenagers who eat dinner with their parents every night and those who have never smoked pot.
- A major predictor of school violence is whether a child has witnessed or suffered from domestic violence.

The text of the Governor's remarks is attached.

#### **REMARKS OF GOVERNOR CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN NEW JERSEY PTA CONVENTION ATLANTIC CITY WEDNESDAY, DEC. 2, 1998**

Thank you for that introduction.

I'd like to start with a story. It's about four teenagers who were driving to school one day. Each one was complaining about a first-period history test for which none of them had studied. They decided that instead of heading to school and failing the test, they would study together for an hour at a local diner, then make up an excuse for their lateness.

As soon as they got to school, they went straight to their history teacher. They told her they were late because their car had a flat tire and they didn't have a proper spare. They offered to take a makeup test at lunch or after school.

Instead, the teacher smiled and told them, "I'll let you take it right now. In fact, it's only one question." So she sat them in desks facing away from each other, handed each a piece of paper, and then asked the only question on the test: "Which tire went flat?"

Unlike those kids in that classroom, I'm glad to be here with you again. Between PTA conventions and legislative days, we have carried on a four-year dialogue about our shared goal of ensuring a world-class education for every child in New Jersey. Over that time, we have discussed pressing issues that range from core standards to classroom technology to charter schools.

Now, as Commissioner Klagholz and I have made clear, we are eager to take what we believe to be a crucial next step to strengthen education in the Garden State by implementing public school choice. As you may know, we are working with the Legislature on a pilot program for each county.

Who will benefit from choice? School districts that need a little competitive energy to improve what they do. Families who want to give their son or daughter an option that's now only available to schoolteachers' kids or to families who can afford tuition.

And the most important people to benefit from choice, of course, will be the children who get a better education because of it. For their sake, I hope to have your support, and the cooperation of your legislators, in setting up a meaningful pilot as soon as possible.

Of course, public school choice is critical, and I could spend all day on the topic, but I want to speak with you today about something else entirely. It's a need that exists in every school district - from the wealthiest to the neediest and everywhere in between. It's a need that exists in every community and in every home. I'm talking about the need for responsible behavior - perhaps something that teacher taught the four teenagers in my story.

As important as it is to learn about trigonometry and Shakespeare, about electromagnetic waves and the Vietnam War, the vitality of our nation and this state absolutely depends on citizens taking responsibility.

Freedom doesn't work without responsibility. The Bill of Rights becomes irrelevant if we claim our rights but ignore our responsibilities.

I want to focus on this need today for a couple of reasons. One, I believe that education without values is a bad investment - and, considering how many billions of dollars we spend on education in New Jersey, a very expensive bad investment. And two, I consider it perhaps our most important job as parents to teach our kids right from wrong, in what we say and what we do.

Let me tell you about an article I read recently. It concerns some young people whose behavior is far more troubling than those in my story.

A couple of weeks ago, police in Wisconsin arrested a group of high school students who had cooked up a plot to take over their school and kill teachers and other students. The group claimed it was just a joke. A classmate of theirs told a news reporter, "I don't think they would have killed anybody." But then he added, "They may have rang off a couple of shots to scare everybody."

I don't know which part of the story is more frightening - that these boys would consider it acceptable behavior to even joke about such a plot, or that a classmate could so easily envision them shooting off weapons to terrorize the school.

Clearly, these are confused children. And yet each of them is somebody's kid. Each of them comes from a home environment that is teaching them something about behavior and responsibility.

Now, I don't mean to say that the only influence on a child is what Mom or Dad says and does. Far from it. Young people receive confusing messages about behavior every day, and from all directions.

Insurance companies, for example, tell clients never to admit fault in an accident, no matter how clearly they were the cause of it. Commercials advertise liposuction for men who want to shed that spare tire - never mind that too much food and too little exercise created it. A basketball star chokes his coach and then sues the league, portraying himself as some sort of victim.

Amid all these conflicting messages, our kids need a clear message about responsibility. Children need to learn that actions have consequences. When you eat too much, or use tobacco, or otherwise abuse your body, there are consequences. When you don't pay attention while you are driving, there are consequences. When you break the law, there are consequences. When you have sex, there are consequences.

For all their potential, enthusiasm, and idealism, our kids are at a disadvantage. They don't have the benefit of age and experience, and they tend to think of themselves as invulnerable. As a result, they have a hard time seeing past the immediate.

Children see that smoking is cool; they can't relate to the reality of lung cancer at middle age. They see that hanging out and playing video games with their friends is fun; they can't appreciate what a college degree will mean 20 years down the road. They feel the urge to have sex right now and find it nearly impossible to think about how a baby will change their life tomorrow and forever.

It's our job as parents not only to help our kids learn right from wrong but also to help them begin to see past the immediate.

Any parent knows that every child makes mistakes. It's part of growing up. We all hope that the mistakes are small and that the lessons they learn will prevent bigger mistakes down the road. These are the moments that shape character. Here are opportunities to have a profound effect on our children - not only as we help them deal with their mistakes but also as we accept the consequences of our own actions.

Being responsible means taking responsibility. It means admitting when you're wrong. It means accepting the penalty for that error - whether it's a speeding ticket or a library fine or a detention - and working hard to avoid the problem next time.

Schools are invaluable, and teachers can be remarkable role models, but the foundation of a good character will always be the example a child receives at home. Even as public schools try to inspire a love of learning, prevent violence, and steer kids away from drugs, the classroom can never replace the dining room.

Study after study shows how much a parent can make a difference.

Kids whose parents read to them - and take an interest in reading themselves - are better prepared for school and more likely to do well.

Research shows that a major predictor of school violence is whether a child has witnessed or, worse, suffered domestic violence.

A Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey survey showed children whose parents talked to them about drugs by the sixth grade were 57 percent less likely to smoke pot than those whose parents wait until 7th or 8th grade.

And surveys by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University show a correlation between teenagers who eat dinner with their parents every night and those who have never smoked pot.

I realize that it's a different ballgame today than when we were growing up. It's becoming the rule rather than the exception to find both Mom and Dad working fulltime - or overtime. With fax machines, email, and pagers, parents are leaving less and less of the workplace behind when they do come home. And then countless community groups with very worthy goals call out for help - whether it's a church project or a local petition drive or a community mentoring program.

The one thing that hasn't changed is that children need their parents in their lives. I've never heard any parent ever look back and regret that they missed that late-night meeting or should have stayed in the office a little longer. Sadly, I have heard from parents who feel like the father in the Harry Chapin song, "Cat's in the Cradle," who never found the time for his boy and then finds his full-grown son doing the same to him.

Now, I suspect that the folks who get involved in the PTA are the kind of parents who pay attention to their kids. You care about your schools because you want what's best for your children.

I think it's wonderful that you are involved, and I want to applaud the efforts of your president, Syvonne Forkin, to increase effective parental involvement in education. As an article in your magazine put it, "Family involvement should not be seen as an add-on ... but rather as an essential component in the ongoing goal of improved student success."

To me, family involvement means acknowledging that you will always be your kids' number one teacher. Family involvement means you take charge of shaping their behavior. Family involvement means being there for your children. Listening to

them. Teaching them right from wrong. Recognizing that these are the only years you will have with them.

I want to close by thanking you again for the New Jersey PTA's efforts to improve our schools by reaching out to other parents, and I want you to know that we will help you reach out if we can. As I said at the outset, you and I share the goal of making every Garden State classroom world- class. What's more, in behalf of our kids, we are striving to build a New Jersey with good jobs, with clean air and clean water, with safe streets and open spaces, and with at least as much freedom and opportunity as each of us has enjoyed.

Each in our own way, we are working to build a world our children will be proud of. Let's work even harder to raise children the world will be proud of.

Thank you.