

FEBRUARY 4, 2002

SCHAKOWSKY ADDRESSES HEALTHY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE CONFERENCE IN CHICAGO

CHICAGO, IL -- One of the most pressing challenges facing our nation at the dawn of this new century is finding ways to improve our public education system. Already, we have made considerable strides by working to pass an education package that we hope will reform and improve overall student performance and close the achievement gap between rich and poor students in America's more than 90,000 public schools. Congress, in a bipartisan effort, mixed innovative new programs with increases in existing programs to form a package that provides a 20% overall increase in public education funding. I am glad to have supported this package because it focuses on maintaining high standards in every classroom, strengthening teacher and principal quality, supporting a safe, healthy, disciplined, and drug-free learning environment and improving student performance. The next step would be to ensure that Congress pays for these increases. I say start with putting on hold the tax cut for the rich.

But I am not satisfied. This bill was a good first step, but there is much more to be done. Our efforts to create new ways to educate our students will mean nothing if we continue to send them to buildings that expose them to serious health risks. We cannot educate 21st century students in 19th century schools. Educators teach and students learn best in environments that are comfortable, healthy, and in good repair. Studies indicate that student achievement is greater and attendance higher when these conditions are met. It is absurd that the federal government has opted to take a back seat in funding school renovations and school building and improvement projects. I say fund these initiatives by asking the top 1% to wait on another tax cut.

A study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that the unmet need for school construction and renovation is estimated to be \$127 billion. American kindergarten through grade 12 schools spend over \$6 billion a year on energy costs, which is more than is spent on books and computers combined. Over half of the nation's K through 12th grade schools are more than 40 years old and in need of renovation, and 6,000 new schools will be required over the next 10 years to accommodate the growing number of students. In many parts of the country, children are attending schools in trailers or dilapidated buildings. This is a national disgrace. We cannot expect to get real results from educational reforms when poor environments stand in the way of learning.

We do not have to look very far for evidence. As many of you know, the roof buckled at Nettlehorst School in Chicago two weeks ago. Luckily, it collapsed when the school was empty and no one was hurt. Imagine the tragedy that might have occurred had that school been filled with students and teachers. We cannot wait to respond to situations like this until after something happens. We must detect, correct, and prevent these

dangers before they become disasters. What's more, a National Education Association study reported that 70% of Illinois' schools have at least one unsatisfactory environmental condition and \$9.2 billion is needed for infrastructure repairs in our state. And we can begin paying for this by giving to local schools instead of trying to send a \$1.4 billion check to IBM and \$254 million to ENRON.

All this combined with the fact that a 1995 US Government Accounting Office (GAO) report states that, "school buildings may be unsafe or harmful to children's health." The GAO is sounding the alarm, its time to heed their call. The federal government cannot sit and watch while our schools fall apart and expose students to toxins that cause debilitating diseases. We need to work to provide safe, environmentally sound and efficient schools for 21st century students now.

The recently passed education package contains the Healthy, High Performance Schools Program. This provision establishes a grant program for States to provide for renovation projects to make existing elementary and secondary school buildings energy-efficient and environmentally healthy. Congress is finally acknowledging the fact that schools are not environmentally sound. I am pleased that this provision made it into the bill, but the law only authorizes the establishment of programs. Congress needs to back the commitment with funds.

The President's FY2003 budget will call for increased defense spending and acceleration of tax cuts for the rich, any funds leftover will be spread thinly, barely allowing us to fund priorities. We must provide better, safer environments for our students and we need the resources to make it happen. In an effort to generate more funds for these kinds of improvements, I introduced the "First Things First Act." This bill will delay the tax cut to the wealthiest recipients until we fund the priorities that we know people care about, including education'.

I am also working with environmental groups to develop comprehensive legislation and initiatives to ensure that school environments are safe. I hope we all stay committed to making our schools environment better, so that our students have a chance to be the best they can be.