Remarks of Senator Daniel K. Akaka before the ‘Aiea Lion's Club at the Fort Shafter Officer's Club

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BEFORE THE AIEA LIONS CLUB
AT THE FORT SHAFTER OFFICERS CLUB
HONOLULU, HAWAII
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Aloha!

It is a great pleasure for me to be here this evening with a very special group of people, the Lions of Aiea.

Being with so many lions reminds me of the biblical story of Daniel in the lions den. The Aiea Lions may be a ferocious group in their attack of projects which serve their community but I know I am among friends tonight.

I give my mahalo to George Corenevsky (cora-nevsky) for asking me to address you today, and I congratulate your incoming and outgoing officers. I also want to commend your organization for the good that you do for your community. The Lions Club has a long standing and most honorable tradition of service to Hawaii and our people.

I will address a topic that we could call a lion of a project, a project that is a great challenge for every individual, our state and nation: Education.

Education takes on extreme importance today because of the global change that is taking place -- change on a scale that we have not seen since World War II.

Western Europe is quickly taking steps to solidy into one economic power. Asian economies continue to grow in strength. In authoritarian nations around the world, individuals are exerting their rights. The governments of Angola and Ethiopia have succumbed to the democratic aspirations of their people. In South Africa, the walls of apartheid are being torn down. In China, one year ago, we witnessed a bold uprising in Tianamin Square. And of course, we are all amazed over the monumental changes taking place in the Soviet Union. As a nation, we've been buoyed by our lightening-fast victory in the Persian Gulf.

In all of this flux, there is great hope for a more democratic world, where individual rights dictate government rather than dictators, a world in which poor nations can transform new-found freedoms into better standards of living. A world in which trade barriers between Europe, America and Asia will be broken down.

I look toward this future with great hope and optimism. At the same time, it is a future that presents greater economic equality between nations, greater competition. The nations, whose people are the best educated will do the best.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of education. President Lyndon Baynes Johnson stated this in 1965 when he spoke to a joint session of Congress. President Johnson said: "Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not military preparedness -- for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace; not our productive economy -- for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government -- for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant."

America needs a highly educated citizenry. Unfortunately, there are disturbing signs that we are moving in the opposite direction.

Federal studies are showing that the reading and math skills of high school graduates 50 years ago were higher than those of today's high school graduates.

Findings from these studies are appalling. In the United States, today, one in four students drop out before

high school graduation. Nearly 30 million Americans are illiterate. And in a study of math proficiency for 13-year-olds, the United States ranked 13th when compared to the other industrialized countries of the world.

In addition, studies show that more than 60 percent of 21 to 25-year-olds do not have the basic reading and writing skills for the modern workplace -- and 90 percent of that group do not have the mathematical competence for today's jobs.

This kind of performance will not sustain us in the highly competitive world of tomorrow. The bottom line is simple: either we improve the quality of our schools, or we consign ourselves to second-rate status in the world.

Our state governments, the Congress and the President are increasingly concerned about the educational needs of our country.

The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor for example, have formed a special federal commission to assess the educational needs of our future workforce. The commission, which is made up of representatives from companies such as General Electric, MCI Communications, Ford and Motorola came up with some very specific conclusions.

The commission stated that students hoping for anything more than a dead-end job will need the following skills:

(1) They will need to read well enough to interpret diagrams, directories, correspondence, manuals, records, charts and graphs.

(2) They must be able to write well enough to use the tools of communication. Whether it be the drafting of correspondence, instuctions, charts and proposals -- tools of the modern work place which help to explain, illustrate and convince.

(3) They will need to understand mathematics well enough to maintain records, estimate results, calculate and apply statistics to reconcile errors, guide negotiations, identify trends -- the tools of today's business and industry.

(4) They will need to listen and speak well enough to explain schedules and procedures, communicate with customers, work in teams and teach others to solve problems.

According to the commission, students who do not achieve this level of competence face dead-end

work, interrupted only by periods of unemployment with few chances to climb and advance in any career. In other words, the reading and math skills required for the jobs of tomorrow are far greater than those required 50 years ago.

We are behind the curve and we need concerted action at every level of our society to get where we need to be.

In the U.S. Senate, we are making useful headway in the form of Senate Bill 2, Strengthening Education for American Families.

Title 1 of this bill would codify national goals which are:

(1) All children enter school prepared to learn.
(2) At least 90 percent of our students graduate from high school.
(3) Students must demonstrate competency in English, math, science, history and geography.
(4) Our students lead the world in math and science achievement.
(5) Every adult American is literate.
(6) Every school is free of drugs and violence.

Title II of the bill establishes a bipartisan council to monitor our progress.

Title III coordinates and improves the delivery of literacy services at the federal, state and local levels.

Title IV, "Education for the Future," contains six additional provisions to meet the educational goals.

First, it provides grants to local educational agencies to develop school-based management and shared decision-making programs in the schools.

Second, It contains a model schools of excellence provision aimed at improving schools in districts with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

A third provision is aimed at enhancing our performance in science and mathematics.

The fourth provision extends the Star Schools Program, which uses satellite technology to bring math, science, foreign language and other courses to students and school districts with little access to them now.

The fifth provision, "Classrooms of the Future," will strengthen math and science performance by awarding

grants to schools to use state-of-the-art learning technology.

The sixth provision provides support for dropout prevention, which is vital because it is estimated that every dollar we invest in dropout prevention will save 12 dollars in increased tax revenue and lowered crime.

In addition to this bill, President Bush has sent his own similar education package to Congress. My hope is that many of his recommendations can be incorporated into this legislation as it moves through the Senate.

But we all know that Government cannot do it alone. We must change our national attitude.

This brings me to an editorial I recently came across in the Washington Post. It said in part that:

"Parents are more interested in watching Roseanne or Monday Night Football than helping children with homework. Politicians are more interested in getting reelected than improving education. Business people are more consumed with enriching themselves than enriching young minds. Our government institutions are being operated for the convenience of bureaucrats instead of for the education of our children."

I think not. I have five children and fourteen grandchildren, and I refuse to believe that this is the kind of America that we have created. But is there a grain of truth to this? Have we as a nation become so complacent to allow the erosion of our education system?

The world is changing and we need to keep pace with the events around us if we are to maintain our place in the world. We need to prepare our children and grandchildren to grapple with the very competitive challenges of the future.

More than one thousand-five-hundred years ago Aristotle said: "The educated differ from the uneducated as much as the living from the dead."

As I stated, government cannot do it alone. I exhort all of you to do your part to help keep our nation alive and healthy in body, mind and soul.

You are Lions. You have a long and proud tradition of service to your community, of caring about society and your fellow man. I urge you to take up education as one of your projects -- as one of your banners.

We must all join together and take up the quest of making sure that every child is given the best possible

opportunity to excel. We must work collectively to ensure that our high school graduates are the best our school system has ever produced.

We as a community must do our share and collectively as a nation, work towards this goal. Then will we be able to say that, yes, our children's future is bright. America's future is secure.

Thank you very much.

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