



All youth ready for college, work & life.

TRANSCRIBED COMMENTS MADE BY FORMER GOVERNOR TOM RIDGE, READY BY 21 NATIONAL LAUNCH, FEBRUARY 27, 2008, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Let me thank all of you for accepting the invitation to participate today not only as founders and funders, but there are a lot of you in the audience that are dedicated to making sure that our children are ready by 21 and understanding what Ready by 21 is all about. I'm grateful to spend a bit of time with you today and look forward to working with you more on this initiative. As Dick said, at the end of the day, how we come together as a country to improve the lives of our children in our local communities will have as much to do with the success of this country as anything else. The one constituency that will not vote in this election but whose future will have everything to do with what is done after the election is aged 18 and under. Politics is about the future. There is no bigger constituency that we should all be concerned about than our children. While we look to government to solve problems, sometimes the solutions are at home.

We all bring a certain passion to this because of personal experiences. Parents who work two jobs all their lives. I had two parents who worked, but I personally benefitted from Little League, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and the newspaper route—all those things you have available to you at home that really round off education. Good schools are a great place to start but there are so many other elements within the community that, if they are brought to bear, can have a positive influence on the development of a child and on the children in the community. So I've got a few thoughts that I'd like to share. Ready by 21 is on to something very significant.

I think whether it's your child or grandchild, everyone should be concerned about the future of every other kid in the neighborhood. Because every child in the neighborhood will all interact at some point in the future and we want that interaction to be a positive thing for the community. And so, while my child may be getting a good education, I certainly think it's important for the kid I don't know, who may live on the other side of town, to get a good education too. That's the society which, when we're long gone and they're grown up—this will be the generation that will be working together, that will be hopefully working together, to keep strong and safe and to continue to build the economy of this country. So we have to be concerned about the education of every child.

Education, I think we all agree, is the most powerful tool of empowerment. Don't we? There are economic inequalities and social challenges and from time to time well-intentioned programs try to address them. But at the end of the day, the way you address them ultimately is by giving every child the capability to address the problems himself or herself through a quality education.

So if we agree that education is the ultimate tool of empowerment and you agree that the nation is at risk, kids are at risk, the future is at risk, then you say to yourself that the paradigm hasn't shifted much. The country wrote a document decades ago that said the nation is at risk. We're still talking about education reform, still trying to figure out ways to empower these children through better education. So maybe we should change the paradigm, understanding that the school is an integral part of it but that there are other influences that can be brought to bear—and that's what Ready by 21 is talking about.

There are two personal experiences that drive me to the conclusion that this is a good model. We're quite confident that we will succeed but we need everybody to support it.

The first is the notion that you drive the decision and engagement from the highest level down to the grassroots level. You drive it back home. You get people in that community to worry about kids all around town. We had a very successful program when I was Governor that was a community-based program. It was successful because it was community-based. Everybody undertook to solve a particular problem or problems in the community because they were all affected by them. Well, there is no greater problem than the challenge of providing positive quality educational experiences for kids.

The second experience is when I had the privilege of serving at Homeland Security. It was a federal agency, but I think it is a national mission because everyone has a role to play. I think everybody has a role to play in supporting education and beyond just formal education – the empowerment of children with positive life experiences as they go through adolescence. It's in our community and our country's long term best interest that we be so engaged because children will learn as much as adults are willing to take the time to teach them. The trouble is that not enough adults will take the time to teach them. We just look to the educational establishment and say it's your job. It's everybody's job; everybody's got a role to play. Not that we're looking to have everyone spending 24 hours a day, 7 days a week ... we've got professionals prepared to do that. But there are other factors, other people, other organizations in the community that have a vital role, and Ready by 21 thinks in terms of the community and of pulling everybody in for that purpose.

One of the great things about being on the same podium with Dick Gephardt is that this is a bi-partisan issue but it should be apolitical. There shouldn't be any partisanship around this at all. There is partisanship from time to time on policy debates on how you affect education. But there's no disagreement that it's in a community's best interest to pull their resources together, not just financial but intellectual and organizational resources, to try to improve the lives of the children and empower them to become better citizens.

Coordination isn't enough. Before I was Secretary of Homeland Security I was Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and the job was to coordinate all agencies. You can go so far and have a certain amount of success with coordination, but you're better off integrating and bringing people together in a more formal way in order to advance whatever your goal is in a more effective way. This is about integrating resources at the local level, which is a significant shift in how we think about empowering our kids.

We're looking for leaders. But you don't have to be elected to be a leader. We're not looking for just elected officials, although we have the National Conference of State Legislatures and they are critically important in this effort, and we have other elected officials. We are looking for leaders at the local level, in the academic community, the nonprofits, the corporate community to step up, to join in and say look -- the future of this community is dependent on how well we raise the kids here, how well we educate young children, how we use non-traditional approaches to empower them through good life experiences and positive experiences, educational and otherwise. And that's what Ready by 21 is about. We want passion with precision. We want to understand what works, what doesn't work. If it works we want to replicate it. If it doesn't, we want to figure out why. If we like it enough, we correct it so it works.

One of the chief proponents of change and advocacy is the United Way. Brian Gallagher, President and CEO, and his organization will be absolutely integral in the Ready by 21 effort – ready for college, work and life. That's the mission and we invite all of you to come along.