

REMARKS BY GASTON CAPERTON
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It's an honor to join this group of state leaders and experts on international affairs to talk about what I believe is one of the most pressing issues for our country.

It was not that long ago that I was working for my home state of West Virginia, dealing with many of the issues that those of you in state education are dealing with today. But since that time, less than 20 years ago, the world has been transformed.

I can remember giving my first state-of-the-state address as governor a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And I remember speaking about that event with great hope. I saw it as dramatic proof that the obstacles of yesterday would not limit our promise for tomorrow. Rather than a world divided in two, dominated by an arms race, we had the opportunity to see the world come together.

At that time, we were already beginning to recognize that it was the knowledge worker who was changing the world economy. That is why I immediately took up education as my priority. We were able to increase salaries and professional development for teachers, build new schools, and become a leader for bringing technology into the classroom.

But back then, I think most of us could not have predicted the sweeping changes our global economy has undergone.

I have a photograph in my conference room that was taken in 1989 at the fall of the Berlin Wall. The image of Germans chipping away at the barrier between East and West Berlin has come to symbolize that great moment in history. The event was also a time marker for the explosion of the global economic world—the population of people who take part in international trade and commerce.

In 1985, the global economic world, comprised mostly of North America, Western Europe, and Japan, was about 2.5 billion people. By the year 2000, as a result of the fall of communism in

Russia, and the economic development in China and India, the global economic world expanded to encompass about 6 billion people—a number very close to the world’s total population.

According to the National Academies: Advisers to the Nation on Science, Engineering, and Medicine, last year China graduated approximately 600,000 engineers, compared to 70,000 in the United States. India graduated 350,000.

I was powerfully reminded of the speed with which other parts of the world are changing on a recent trip to China. Twenty-five years ago, I entered China for the first time aboard a dirty, airless train crammed with peasants carrying chickens and ducks. People were climbing through the windows. This year, I left China on a quiet, air-conditioned train taking me to the airport at 260 miles per hour.

America is at a critical moment in history. If I can return to the image of a train, I would say that at this critical moment, the United States is offtrack, or we’re not going fast enough, or we are even headed in the wrong direction. I believe there is one answer to all three of those problems: education.

When the Berlin Wall signaled hope for the end of the international arms race, it began an international education race. My vision for this country is for America to lead the education race—and make it a race to the top, not to the bottom. A race to the top is a race not only for excellence in education, but for equity.

All of you here today share my belief that education is the key to our nation’s future. And you realize that we can’t just build education the same way we have in the past, even in the ways I was focusing on as governor not that long ago.

Of course we need to continue to focus on math, science, and technology. That is critical. But we also need to keep asking ourselves: What is it going to mean to be an educated, contributing citizen of the United States?

Or, perhaps the more important question is: What is it going to mean to be an educated, contributing citizen of the world?

One of the answers is to study the languages and cultures of the world. This is an imperative for the economic health of our country, for our diplomatic strength, and our cultural development.

Even here at home, where we have so many young students learning the English language, wouldn't it make it fairer—wouldn't it improve understanding and respect for each other even within our own country—to have *all* young people working at learning a second language?

Marty Abbott, the director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, put it this way: “Teachers need to show young students how much they are like people around the world, rather than how different.”

The ancient Biblical writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that “for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. . . .A time to keep silent and a time to speak.”

It is clear to me, and to many leaders in the United States—whether they be in education, government, or business—that this is the season and the time to learn critical languages like Chinese and Japanese. It's time we better understand the people and cultures that make up the overwhelming majority of the world that lies beyond our borders.

I know there is work going on in my home state of West Virginia on this front, and in states such as Wisconsin and New Jersey.

Senator Jon Corzine from New Jersey has pledged to enhance the world language programs in public schools. He recently announced: “By 2009, our goal is to triple the number of schools offering critical languages such as Chinese and Arabic.”

We are glad to see these efforts being made, and we know that it will catch on around the country.

At the College Board, we want to be ready to do everything we can to help them.

The College Board is a 100-year-old nonprofit organization of 5,000 colleges, schools, and education organizations. Our mission is to connect students to college success, with a focus on

excellence and equity. For the last seven years, we've accelerated our efforts to help more traditionally underserved students go to college.

I know that you agree with me that we all have to do everything we can to race to the top and fight those who are willing to settle for a race to the bottom.

We've added writing to the SAT because writing is a neglected skill that is critical for success. We are focusing advocacy work on issues such as affordability and access to college, and professional development for teachers. We've established new, small schools to serve low-income students funded by the Gates and Dell foundations; and developed an integrated learning system for grades 6 through 12 that builds toward college-level high school courses.

And we're most proud of the Advanced Placement Program and our new commitment to world languages. As most of you know, AP creates a bridge between college and high school. It provides much-needed professional development for teachers and asks students to take the responsibility of thinking for themselves.

AP asks students to engage the world critically and analytically. It's our hope that AP can serve as an anchor for increasing rigor in our schools and reducing the achievement gap.

We've worked hard to bring AP to thousands more students, particularly in underserved schools. For example, between 1996 and 2005, there was a 185 percent increase in successful exam scores among African-American students, an increase of 222 percent among Hispanic or Latino students, and an increase of 137 percent among Native American students.

But we realized two years ago that this 50-year-old program was offering only French, Spanish, German, and Latin. The program was too Eurocentric. It was time to expand to include world history and languages.

We're encouraged by the business community, the State Department, and the parents and students who recognize the value of studying the language and culture of countries like China, Japan, and Russia.

We've been encouraged by educators who are way ahead of us and doing great things. One wonderful example is Yvonne Chan, who is the principal of the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center. The Vaughn School is a pre-K through 12 large, urban public school within the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Chan described the circumstances of many of her students who have recently come to the United States from Mexico and other countries. Seventy-eight percent of their pre-K to eighth-grade students are English language learners. Nearly 100 percent of her student body qualifies for free lunch, and many come from families who have come to this country with aspirations to become financially sound.

"We look for ways to turn risk into opportunity," she says, and she builds on her students' already international perspective, as well as their experience with learning a second language, to succeed with foreign language instruction.

She has 5-year-olds who are being exposed to Chinese language and culture. "What better way to close the achievement gap," she argues, "but to integrate international content into the curriculum?" She is a strong believer in starting international education as early as possible.

I know from my conversations with educators, College Board research, and the intense media interest in China that the anticipation for the Chinese course is very high. Our biggest concern now is designing an effective curriculum and finding the teachers to successfully meet the growing demand for high-quality, rigorous materials that will bring the world into our classrooms.

We have great opportunities and great challenges ahead of us, but we have made a good start.

As we have learned from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu:

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

In a recent article by Thomas Friedman, he talks about the issues of globalization in day-to-day, realistic terms.

“If we were having a national discussion about what is most important to the country today and on the minds of most parents, I have no doubt that it would be a loud, noisy dinner-table conversation about why so many U.S. manufacturers are moving abroad—not just to find lower wages, but to find smarter workers, better infrastructure, and cheaper health care.

“The conversation would be about why U.S. twelfth-graders recently performed below the international average for 21 countries in math and science.”

I would add to Friedman’s topics the numbers I cited earlier about engineers, and the lack of America’s commitment to learning a second language.

America must strengthen its education system to continue our leadership in this ever-expanding world of global competitiveness. That focus demands more resources and commitment to education excellence and equity.

America must courageously reassess its priorities, announcing, once and for all, that future international leadership is tied directly to educational fitness.

We can’t starve our education system. We have to have the energy and courage to nurture it, by committing more resources to a rigorous curriculum for all students in world languages and cultures, as well as math, science, and technology.

American education cannot climb the formidable mountain before it without providing young people with the necessary tools. International progress will be neither cheap nor easy.

What America needs are leaders like you who are willing to ask the tough questions and who are committed to taking action so that we remain a global leader in education. Going along to get along is not enough.

America needs leaders like you who will speak up with a united voice. Together, we have enormous political clout. We must dare to dream and be risk takers. America needs your collective best efforts to make this happen. I know it will receive them.