Culberson, newly elected to Texas' Seventh Congressional District. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary Paige.

Remarks at Merritt Extended Elementary School
January 25, 2001

It's always a good sign when the principal gets a standing ovation—[*laughter*]—from teachers and parents. Having spent some quality time with you, I now understand why.

First, Mr. Superintendent, thank you very much. Your reputation is a strong one because you believe every child can learn and are willing to work hard and make the tough decisions to make sure every child does learn in the District. Mr. Superintendent, thanks for coming.

I am so pleased and honored that the chairman of the Senate Education Committee and the ranking minority leader, Senator Jeffords and Senator Kennedy, are here; Chairman Boehner, Representative Miller came as well. You all did not have to come. And for you to come is not only a great honor for this school, but Laura and I really appreciate it.

I'm also pleased the First Lady is here. I always used to say, you can always judge the nature of a man by the company he keeps. [*Laughter*] And I keep pretty darn good company—[*laughter*]—particularly when it comes to children and reading and education. She is a former public school librarian who loves children, who loves books, and has got the ability to combine the two. And I love her.

Dr. Shannon, thanks for coming. Those of us who have been involved with public education know this irrefutable fact, that the quality of a school depends on the quality of a principal; that when you find a good principal, the CEO of a school, you'll find a school that achieves what we all want: every child learning.

And there are some basic principles involved. One is to have leadership, not only at the district level but at the school level, set the highest of high standards. Leaders that understand that every child can learn and refuse to accept excuses when they don't. Dr. Shannon believes that way. She asked a question, "Why aren't our children achieving?" And when they begin to achieve, she raises the bar. That's what a leader does.

Secondly, and the reason we've come to Merritt, besides getting out of the White House—[*laughter*]—is to herald what happens inside the walls here. And what happens here is there is a strong sense of accountability, which means there is a strong sense of the possible. Accountability is so important. And by accountability I mean testing children to determine whether or not children are learning. I believe it's the cornerstone of reform. I believe it's the essence of excellence in education, and I believe it's important to do so, to test every year, to make sure children are not left behind.

I worry about a system that doesn't test, because I ask the question, like Dr. Shannon asked the question, "How do you know if you don't?" I worry about a system that periodically tests, because one year you may test, and everything is fine. In 4 years, you measure again, and all of a sudden something isn't fine, and you've missed 4 years of opportunity to make sure a child doesn't slip behind.

Accountability is important for students. It's important for—and I know students don't like to take tests, and I'm confident the parents here heard the same thing