

**2011 Leadership Institute:
Kathleen Sebelius**

[Applause]

Kathleen Sebelius: Well, good morning, everyone. I can't imagine a better way to start a gloomy Monday morning than with this wonderful, enthusiastic crowd. So I just want to start by thanking you for changing children's lives every day that you go to work. Thank you very much, and let's give yourselves a big round of applause. [Applause]

In spite of that small state glitch, I – [Laughter] I want to give a shout out to my sunflower brothers and sisters who are here. I'm sure there are some of you in the room. And also, really, to thank Yvette for her terrific leadership of the Office of Head Start. You know... Yes. [Applause]

When I became Secretary, the Head Start Office had not had a permanent director in two years. And we looked across the country for talent and leadership, and we couldn't have found a better person to fill the position than Yvette, somebody who has devoted her entire career to this program and the children and family of America. So again, thank you for your great leadership. [Applause]

And I also want to thank all the program and parent leaders who are here today. There's not a lot of outside recognition in early childhood education. There's not enough, certainly. This is the wrong profession to go into if you want to make a lot of money or have high praise and glory. You all might know that. [Laughter] But we just saw a video which I think brings home a really important point. There's no one who makes a bigger difference in the lives of the children you serve than you do. So again, I want to thank you for your hard work and tell you it really does make a difference every day you go to work.

I've been a passionate believer in Head Start and early childhood education for as long as I've been in public service, and frankly, as long as I've been a mom. It's because the idea behind Head Start, that every child, no matter where they're born or what their parents do, should get an opportunity to reach their full potential. It's the same idea that really is at the heart of the American dream. But there's an urgent economic case for Head Start, too.

Over the last 50 years, the world economy has undergone a major shift. Today, many businesses can set up shop anywhere they have an internet connection; and that means jobs will follow the talent wherever they be. Software companies don't move to Silicon Valley for the weather. Biotech companies haven't located in Boston to walk the Faneuil Trail or see the historic sites. They go there because that's where the talent is. But other countries have caught on also.

They're investing in their own education systems with the hopes of attracting the jobs of the future. And that's why, for the last two years, President Obama has believed that we won't out-compete the rest of

the world unless we begin by out-educating the rest of the world. [Applause] And that's an important fundamental concept. And we can't out-educate the rest of the world unless all of our children get that head start in life.

So, you know better than anyone the early years are totally critical to the success of someone in later years. That means when rapid development is happening in our children's brains, they're getting an early start. That means when our children are picking up social and emotional and academic skills that they carry with them for the rest of their lives that they're in a safe, secure, loving, and learning environment. The children who get the support they need during these early years are the most prepared for kindergarten, which means they are the most likely to succeed in early grades; most likely to graduate from high school; most likely to go on to college.

So, early learning programs like Head Start and Early Head Start set off, really, a chain reaction – a good chain reaction that follows children through every stage of their lives. That's the power of the work you do. And that's why the Obama administration has made an historic commitment to early childhood education, starting with Head Start and Early Head Start.

Now, through the investments in the Recovery Act – about the third piece of legislation that the president signed – we have doubled the size of Early Head Start and made Head Start available to 61,000 more children. [Applause] And that – that is good news.

And even in these very difficult budgetary times, when we're forced to make cuts that we don't want to make, we fought to preserve the funding for these additional children. And just as families who face tough times don't immediately raid the college savings fund when the money gets tight, President Obama continues to argue that we need to protect this critical investment in our future. And we've – we've been heartened that the budget proposed by the Senate would maintain most of the Head Start expansion. And that, again, you need to keep front and center. [Applause]

This administration also firmly believes that for children to reach their full potential, they need to know more than their ABCs. That's important; but they need additional learning. They need to be critical thinkers. They need to understand the book, not just the ability to recognize the letters. They need to be physically healthy. They need to have social and emotional skills to listen and work with others. And they need families who are actively engaged in their development and education.

Now, that's the comprehensive approach that it's – Head Start helped to pioneer. From the beginning, Head Start programs understood that it's great to have a good curriculum, but that curriculum doesn't really matter if children are too hungry or sick to pay attention. [Applause] And you know that so well. And it's great to teach kids a new skill, but the lesson that will be far more powerful is if it's also reinforced at home. So the truth is, to get our children ready for school, we need to provide all of those things. And that's the principle that you've provided in early education policies. And for that, again, you should be thanked. [Applause]

For example, one of the biggest lessons Head Start has taught us is how important it is to involve family members. Every year, hundreds of thousands of parents volunteer through Head Start, playing a role in their child's development that goes much deeper than just showing up for a periodic PTA meeting. We want to promote the same kind of engagement across the country, which is why we fought to make sure last year's health care law contained funds to support innovative home visiting programs. And these programs train professionals, visit expecting parents and new parents, to provide information and help them prepare for the birth of their child. And then they continue to visit during the child's earliest years, sharing parenting tips, identifying potential health and developmental problems.

For a very small initial investment, these programs can improve maternal and child health, reduce child maltreatment, and help parents develop the skills and confidence that will benefit their children for years to come. Like many early childhood programs, home visiting has a huge payoff. In fact, studies show that supporting our children's healthy development in their earliest years is one of the best investments we can make as a society. And that's why the Obama administration is so committed to supporting these programs. That's also why we're committed to making sure these programs are of the highest quality possible.

Today, around the country, there are early childhood programs that have developed innovative and successful ways to do everything from teaching kids how to count to getting parents to read to their children, to keeping students safe and healthy. These programs, and you as teachers, have figured out how to use limited funds more effectively to make an even bigger impact in the lives of the children you serve. And that's why we want to help those best practices spread.

Now, I know you share that commitment; and that's why you came here to this conference to develop new approaches that you can bring back to your home community. It's why many of the best practices we're hoping you will adopt were first developed in Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms. But in the past, the federal government hasn't been a good partner. It certainly hasn't been as good a partner as we could have been.

Now, I know that because I experienced it firsthand when I was working in our home state to improve the quality of our early childhood programs, first as a legislator and then as governor of Kansas. The federal government talked a lot about quality, but when it came to doing it we were really on our own. So today, my message is to you that it's not just that you're on your own. This administration wants to do everything we can to partner with you to help you improve your programs so you can make an even bigger difference in our children's lives.

Earlier this year, Secretary Arnie Duncan and I launched the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, an innovative new program that will reward states across the country that are working to raise quality in their early childhood programs. We believe that Head Start needs to be part of any serious state proposal. But Head Start has always been a leader, not a follower, and there's no reason that efforts to improve quality should be any different. And that's why earlier than this challenge was launched, we launched the Head Start Road Map to Excellence.

This is a comprehensive plan to provide you with the resources and support you need to do the incredible work you do even better. For example, we've revamped our training and technical assistance system. Anyone who's ever spent one day with a four-year-old, much less a whole classroom of them, knows just how challenging your jobs are and how much skill is required. And that's why we've launched six national centers that will help provide you with the best practices that can help you make an even bigger difference in your children's lives.

But we're also working with Head Start programs around the country to collect data on quality. There's no single number that can capture all the ways that kids benefit from your programs. But using our *CLASS* tool, we can gather valuable information on the quality of the instruction, the emotional support students receive, and the classroom environment – information that can help you identify areas to improve.

And finally, as you know, we've proposed new rules that would require low-performing Head Start programs to compete for continued funding. And I know that some of you are not looking forward to these rules. Some of you may be worried that performance indicators will be ambiguous or arbitrary; and I know those are understandable concerns. But I want to tell you this morning that we're fully committed to having a final regulation that's clear, that's fair, that's transparent, and reflects our best knowledge of what kinds of programs work best for our children. We've also read and are considering more than 16,000 comments on these rules that have been very helpful as we move forward. And we need to keep moving forward.

We're here today because we believe there's nothing more important than our children's development in their early years. And that's why we all believe that it's so important for them to get the comprehensive services provided by Head Start programs, instead of just being left in a room in front of a television. It's also why we need to make sure we have the highest quality Head Start programs possible.

We need to give every child, in every Head Start classroom, the best shot at reaching their potential. And as part of a broader approach to improving quality, requiring the lowest performing programs to compete for continued funding is an important part of doing just that. The stakes resting on our efforts are high. It's not just our children's future in our balance, but it's America's future in the balance. In a world where jobs follow the best-trained workers, America has no chance of leading the world if our children have already fallen behind by their fifth birthdays.

And I believe the incredible turnout here today is a sign that we can meet this challenge if we work together. You already do incredible work every day. You help America's neediest children reach for their dreams. If you can focus that same determination and energy on asking how we can help Head Start to work even better, I believe our children will be able to accomplish limitless goals.

Again, I want to thank you for the work you do every day. I look forward to being a partner with you as we work for a great 21st century America. Thank you so much. [Applause]