

**2011 Leadership Institute:
Roberto Rodriguez**

[Applause]

Roberto Rodriguez: Thank you. Thank you for the warm welcome. Good morning!

Audience: Good morning.

Roberto: It's really, truly a pleasure to join you all here today – all of the Head Start leaders, directors, policy council members, parents, staff in the room – to see so many of you gathered, excited about embarking on the work to advance Head Start. I'd like to begin by thanking Yvette for her kind introduction – more importantly, for her leadership in our administration – and to her entire team at OHS for all they do each and every day to support Head Start and to support your work. So, can we give them a round of applause? [Applause]

As you gather here this morning to expand your knowledge, to connect across experiences, and to celebrate your successes and explore new opportunities, it really is a transformative moment for Head Start; and it's a transformative moment for early childhood development more broadly. We know, today more than ever, about what our children need to be successful later in life. We have new strategies. We have new opportunities for reform. And for our nation's future success, it's important, now more than ever, that we invest in and support our nation's most precious resource, which is our infants, our toddlers, and our youngest children. [Applause]

So, I'd like to begin today where the President left off just a few weeks ago in his joint address to Congress when he outlined the contours of the American Jobs Act. He called for new investments in education, including 30 billion dollars to save and create up to 280,000 education jobs in our schools and in our early childhood programs across the country. He called for... [Applause]

Yes. He called for billions more of – of an investment to modernize our schools so that our childrens have the – so that our children have the environments that they need to expand their knowledge and their learning. And the President will be in Dallas this afternoon; I don't know if there's anybody from Dallas here... [Audience shouting] All right. He'll be in Dallas this afternoon talking more about that American Jobs Act. But in his remarks, the President also spoke more broadly about the times that we're living in. He spoke about our shared challenges as Americans and about the grand contest that we face.

Globally, this is not a contest between Democrats and Republicans here in Washington. This is really a contest for us to win the future; one that demands that we rebuild our economy so that it's competitive, growing, and working for all Americans. This is a contest that we must win. We must win it for our nation's future, for the future of the children that each of you serves every day. There's an economic imperative behind this contest, because the ability of our nation's children to complete – to compete in

a global workforce and a new economy depends on our ability to help them develop the knowledge and the 21st-century skills that they'll need to succeed. We must educate our way to a stronger economy. And while the opportunity to obtain an outstanding education used to just be a pathway for some, today – in today's economy, it is a prerequisite for all.

But the President also reminds us of the moral imperative that we have for change, a moral imperative to enrich the learning and lives of each of our children, to promote their advancement, and to invest in their success. And this is an imperative that challenges us to live up to our most fundamental values as Americans: to advance fairness, to promote equity, to foster opportunity for all of America's families. [Applause]

This ultimately is a question of whether we will live up to our highest ideals as a democracy. And that question depends on the decisions that we make today to invest in our youngest children, not just as the engine of America's economy but as the engine of the American Dream. This is why the President committed, early in our administration, to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education from the day they're born to the time that they begin a career. And that's why, as an administration, we've dedicated ourselves to transforming the opportunities afforded to our nation's children, to improving outcomes, to doing a better job than we have been before to educate our sons and daughters. This is why we've placed this goal of a complete and competitive education at the heart of our administration's domestic policy agenda.

It's at the heart of our administration's plans to win the future. And this is why, as a first fundamental step, we've launched a comprehensive early childhood plan to dramatically expand early childhood education and to continue to improve its quality, aimed at ensuring the future educational success of our children. We all know, you all know, in everything you do each and every day, that the formative years of a child's life are the most important for shaping their foundation for learning and for success. We know that a child's learning begins at birth. It takes shape as they're nurtured, as they're challenged, as they develop relationships with the adults around them; and a robust body of research in developmental science tells us how important these early experiences are in shaping a child's future.

And yet, despite what we know about all of that, we still as a nation lack the will generally to provide the adequate support that all of our children need to succeed. We know one in every five children in the U.S. lives in poverty. We know that the poverty rate for our African-American and Latino children is twice that of their non-Latino and non-African-American peers. We know that 2.7 million children under three live in low-income families. We know that a younger – the younger a child is the more likely he or she is to live in a family that's experiencing poverty in this country. We know that we have over 40 percent of our – of our nation's children that exhibit risk factors that will impact – have likely impact in their learning and success at school. And too many of our disadvantaged young children lack access to the programs and the services that can help them succeed.

Take Early Head Start, for example. It's one of our most effective federal programs. [Applause] That's right. We are still serving, in Early Head Start, less than five percent of its eligible population; and we pay the price for this. We know then – that at age three, the gaps that we're seeing in early vocabulary growth, those are still largely tracking socio-economic lines. And we know that, at kindergarten entry, studies document a school readiness gap that's as wide as 60 percentage points.

Each of you lives these statistics up close and personal each and every day. You see firsthand how they threaten the lives of kids and families that don't have access to these programs and services. Ultimately, they have the potential to shortchange our future. So, just as we've harnessed education as an engine for economic progress and the American Dream in the past, so too today must we spur a new – a new movement to invest in and to strengthen education for our youngest children. [Applause]

Our administration has begun that – that commitment through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. We've begun, through a five billion dollar investment there in early childhood education programs, to promote early learning and development. Part of that investment is a 2.1 billion dollar investment that supports over 61,000 new children in Head Start and in Early Head Start. [Applause]

We're also committed to new changes there. You know, we've redesigned the training and technical assistance system to bring current research and the best practices into programs, to help work with programs to improve practice, and to improve our relationships and connections with local school districts. We've brought a new family engagement strategy, which is exciting and – and builds on the great tradition that Head Start has to engage and involve each and every one of its families in its programs and services.

And I want to be clear today about our administration's commitment to maintain this historic expansion in Head Start and in Early Head Start. [Applause] We've also committed, with the Recovery Act, to expand IDEA preschool and infant and toddler programs – [Applause] – to continue the expansion of regular home visits for more of our needy parents to better ensure that they're prepared, that their kids are prepared, that they're healthy, that they're prepared for school and for life.

And most recently, we've launched a new Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. This is a new 500 million dollar investment to challenge states to raise the bar on the quality of their programs. And we know that this historic investment will provide us a special opportunity to build a bigger, better, coordinated system of early care and education that's focused on our most vulnerable children. [Applause]

We certainly know that we can't do this work overnight, this work to transform, to enhance, to expand our early learning programs across the country. It's a long path to excellence. But ultimately, America's ability to win the future depends on our work today. It depends on the work that each and every one of you do in your programs, working with your families, working with your kids, investing in their success, one by one.

And that plan to win the future? That future will be won in each and every one of your programs and your classrooms. So thank you all for all you do each and every day, and let's continue to work together to win the future. [Applause]