

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH ALMA POWELL

SUBJECT: ALMA J. POWELL, NATIONAL CHAIR OF AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE, WILL SPEAK AT A NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON TO DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES FACING THE NATION'S YOUTH AND REMEDIES TO REVERSE THE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT CRISIS

MODERATOR: DONNA LEINWAND, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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DONNA LEINWAND: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Donna Leinwand. I'm a reporter for *USA Today* and I'm president of the National Press Club.

We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists. And on behalf of our 3,500 members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and our guests in the audience today. I'd also like to welcome those of you who are watching us on C-Span.

We're celebrating our 100th anniversary this year, and we've rededicated ourselves to a commitment to a future of journalism through informative programming, journalism education, and fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards, I will ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions as possible.

For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public who attend our luncheons, and not necessarily from the working press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. From you're right, Kevin McCormally of *Kiplinger Magazine*; Stephanie Aaronson of PBS; Charlotte Wright of McGraw Hill; Carmita Vaughn of America's Promise and a guest of the speaker; General Colin Powell, husband of the speaker.

And skipping over the podium for a moment, Angela Greiling-Keane, chair of the Speakers Committee and a reporter for Bloomberg News; Ed Lewis, Toyota and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's event. Thank you. Marguerite Kondracke, president of America's Promise and also a guest of our speaker; Helen Thomas of Hearst Newspapers; Jerry Zremski of *The Buffalo News*, and a former president of the National Press Club; and finally, Chuck Porcari of the American Federation of Teachers. (Applause.)

Last year, in 17 of the nation's 50 largest cities, fewer than half the students graduated from high school. Among those cities, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Cleveland. Nationally, about 70% of U.S. students graduate on-time with regular diplomas. In a time when U.S. students are competing with the best and brightest throughout the world for scarce jobs in a rocky economy, these are very frightening statistics.

Our guest today has called the high school dropout rate "a tragedy that will jeopardize the nation's future if it is allowed to continue". "Education," says Alma Powell, "...is tied to our economic competitiveness and prosperity, and must be a critical part of the economic recovery plans." It seems the Obama Administration is actually listening, having proposed new spending initiatives to improve teacher effectiveness, support low performing schools, and efforts to improve student outcomes in the 2010 budget proposal.

As chair of America's Promise Alliance, Mrs. Powell has been described as an unabashed advocate for America's next generation. She and her husband, General Colin Powell, who we are pleased to have join us on a day as today, founded the Alliance in 1997 to challenge our nation to make children a national priority. Mrs. Powell believes we can nurture and build the character of every child to become successful in life.

She has clearly defined those lofty goals based on five objectives, or, as she calls them, promises. "Children," she says, "...need caring adults, safe places at home or in schools that provide structured activities, a healthy start through good

nutrition and immunization, an effective education for career development, and opportunities to help others so the cycle keeps on going.” The Alliance has sought to fulfill those five promises by providing expertise and financial support to children’s organizations across the country. And now, twelve years later, more than 500 organizations in communities have embraced those ideas and pledged their support.

The Alliance is only the latest venture in a long commitment to children and education. From 1989 to 2000, Mrs. Powell served as chairman of the National Council of the Best Friends Foundation, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of young girls. She is the author of two books, *My Little Wagon* and *America’s Promise*. Those are children’s books which she launched in 2003 with great success.

Mrs. Powell comes by it naturally. Her father and uncle were both principals at African-American high schools in Birmingham where she grew up. She earned her degree from Fisk University in Nashville and studied speech pathology and audiology at Emerson College in Boston where she met her husband on a blind date.

In an interview shortly after Barack Obama’s historic election as President, she said, “It is a stunning reminder for all children that the promise of America is real and that they can achieve almost anything through hard work and determination. Please welcome our speaker today, Mrs. Alma Powell. (Applause.)

MRS. ALMA POWELL: Thank you very much, Donna. You’ve heard my speech. It’s a great pleasure to be here with you today, although I must say that when I noticed the date, April first, I wondered what the Speakers Committee had in mind. Never mind. I’m not going to tell you that this is an April Fools joke.

But actually it’s very appropriate that we are here on the first of April because for too long we’ve been fooling ourselves. We fooled ourselves into a false sense of security while a graduation crisis eats away at our economic future. We have fooled ourselves into thinking that we can continue to prosper when nearly one-third of our students drop out of school and when many more of those who earn diplomas lack the skills for college and the workplace.

One reason I’m here today is to tell you what we’re doing about that and about the future of our young people, and why it is a matter of utmost concern. A few years ago, I was being interviewed on *The Today Show* and I gave them some startling statistics regarding children and their welfare in this country. We have the highest infant mortality rate, one of the highest in the world. A few years ago, a study was done of 21 developed nations on how well they take care of their

child in their legislation and in their provisions for them. You will be astounded to know, I think, that out of 21 developed nations, we ranked number 20.

Meredith Vieira said to me, “Well, how did this happen?” I said, “Look out the window. You see all the people milling around out there, happy faces waiting to see you and the other anchors who come out there? We all walk along knowing that we have the security of living in the best country on the face of the Earth that controls more wealth than most countries on the face of the Earth. Everything is okay with us, isn’t it?” We are not paying attention.

As you will remember, America’s Promise was founded some 12 years ago by a number of very concerned people who were concerned about children’s welfare. And my husband became the founding chairman. Twelve years ago, all the living Presidents called a summit in Philadelphia. And it was called A Summit For America’s Future. And each one of the Presidents signed a declaration that included these words: “As each of us has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, each of us has a duty to take responsibility, not just for ourselves and our families, but for one another.”

And the Presidents affirmed that we especially share an obligation to our children, to see that we fulfill those five promises that you just heard about. The work of America’s Promise Alliance has always revolved around those five promises, and it revolves around a simple idea that we can achieve more by working together than one organization can achieve working alone. Simply put, we’re better together.

Our alliance now has 280 national partners up from 160 last year. That’s quite a growth. These partners represent the business community, educators, non-profits, policymakers, and many others. Our unique strength is the ability to mobilize Americans through our partners and their local networks. And that ability to mobilize has never been more important.

When America’s Promise began, we had as our mission to reach two million children by the year 2000. And we engaged communities of promise around the country. You saw the signs. You saw the little red wagons. And everybody was happily joining the crusade with the General leading. We tend to forget things. We have to keep the profile high.

Couple years ago, somebody said to me, “Whatever happened to that organization your husband was working for?” I said, “It’s still there and it’s still working hard for the future of our children.” And so we say, let’s come together again and redefine our mission, and tell people again that we are still here and the needs of our children are still very prevalent. And they grow more every day.

America's Promise's beginnings were just a beginning. The campaign never can stop because the children keep coming. And they all have the same needs. We hear people say constantly in talking about today's young people, "Well, they just don't have any interest in anything. They just have such a sense of entitlement. They just won't do anything constructive." You have to remember that our children only have what we give them. They come here an empty vessel, if you will, waiting to be filled with what they need to go through life. And it is our responsibility to do that.

Today marks a special anniversary. Exactly one year ago today, our Alliance launched a campaign to mobilize the country to act on the high school dropout crisis. As you've heard mentioned, about one-third of our high school students drop out of school every year. Actually, it's one every 26 seconds. Because the end of today, 7,000 kids will have dropped out of school.

Now if 7,000 kids disappeared from our midst, we would be alarmed. All the forces of our country would be gathered around to find those 7,000 children. Where are they? Are they safe? Well, that's what we have to do now. We have to mobilize our efforts to retrieve those 7,000 and to prevent more from dropping out. It is an economic issue. We can't have any future without children who are well prepared for the future. Dropouts in the course of a year can cost our country as much as \$261 billion dollars. We are all aghast at the money that is put out for bailout funds. But if we don't rescue our children and give them a solid foundation, we will be spending that, and more. And our country cannot sustain that.

These figures are alarming and they're unacceptable. And we have to realize where it puts us in the middle of a global workforce and marketplace. When we began the dropout prevention campaign, we released a report called "Cities in Crisis". And it showed a very troubling picture. In the largest public school districts in our 50 largest cities, the average graduation rate is about 50%. In some city school systems, barely one in three young people graduate.

In a few weeks, on April 22nd, we will release a second report, "Cities in Crisis 2". In addition to the newest information, this updated report will measure the economic impact of dropouts in our cities. It will analyze some key indicators, including the educational level of the workforce and the economic returns on education. This new report will shine a bright light on how much opportunity, both economic and personal, is lost when young people don't earn a high school diploma.

So what can we do? How can we help turn the tide on the graduation crisis and fuel the American economy? It comes back to those five promises. I think at least four of the promises in a young person's life dramatically improve the odds

that a young person will graduate. And graduating from high school, ready for college and work, dramatically changes the odds of success for that person. Now chances are, each one of you here grew up with caring adults, people who took an interest in you and kept you on the right path. Chances are you that you had places where you were safe and could stay out of trouble. Chances are that each one of you had all the things it takes for healthy development and an education that prepared you to go out into the world ready for college and work.

And you probably had the opportunity to learn the value of service. Many people that I've spoken here to this morning are actively engaged in service and service to young people. But where did you get this? Where did it come from? Somebody gave that to you.

But imagine if you had only one or none of those promises. That is the reality for 20% of our young people. Suddenly the odds change. You're much less likely to do well in school. You're at much greater risk for being involved in violence. And you're at greater risk for dropping out. And when you drop out, your chances of success become even slimmer.

These statistics say you will earn only about a third of what a college graduate makes, less than \$20,000 a year. And even if you earn a GED, you will barely begin to close that income gap. And there's a 75% chance that you will be on food stamps and other assistance. You're eight times more likely to wind up in prison and you're likely to become a parent of a dropout and perpetuate that cycle.

Dropouts are not the only crisis. Of our students who do earn a degree, far too few are ready for college and the workforce. There have been a number of articles recently about colleges having to do remedial work for those young people who have graduated and gained admittance to those colleges. But before they can educate them, they've got to do remedial work, which means we're not doing our job in our schools.

But only 40% of our graduates go to college, and over 80% of tomorrow's jobs will demand post-secondary education. So that's one of the problems. And only about half of those who go to college will finish. As President Obama has said, this is a prescription for economic decline. Yesterday in *The Washington Times*, I read an article about the future of young black men and how they are not in college. Even those that are there do not stay for very long. This is a crisis, too. It's a crisis for the girls who are gettin' educated, 'cause they don't have anybody to marry. And if all of 'em are in jail, where you gonna find a husband? So we have to work hard to bring all of them into real time.

The economic impact is why the dropout situation is so urgent. Now, some people say that we have to put the economic recovery plan first and put this on hold before we can focus. But I'm here to tell you something different. We're simply not going to sustain our ability to compete in a global economy unless we raise those graduation rates. We pay an enormous price when our kids are unprepared. We pay billions in higher costs for social services and criminal justice. And we just can't afford to keep doing this.

While we fix our banking system, we also have to invest in America's human capital, the promise and potential of our young people. Because they are the engine that's going to drive the economy in the years to come. Now in other countries, there's a great deal more emphasis put on education, especially in those developing nations of India and China.

I recently saw a DVD that showed the lives of two young people in The United States and one person in China and one young person in India. The young people in The United States were achievers in their schools. They were out in Oregon, I believe. Life was pretty good for them. The young man being interviewed said, "Oh yeah, the SAT, yeah, it wasn't any problem. I didn't have to worry about that." And they had both gotten accepted in colleges.

Then it showed us the other two young people. Free time was not known to them. There was no time for play and for just being a teenager, as we allow for ours. Every waking moment was spent dedicated to learning and striving to be accepted in the college of their choice. They took music lessons or art lessons in addition to their academic studies, but that was their prime focus. That was their life, all day long, every day. And even as good as they were, they were not good enough for the best colleges in their countries.

How can our children compete with young people who are prepared for all things? Our education system now demands a much more technical focus. This is a world driven by technology. Tom Friedman says the world is flat and that means that all those other kids are there with our kids. It's also a nation at war, wars around the world. And many of those children live in war-torn situations and have learned coping skills and a hardness, which you have to develop when you live in that kind of situation.

Our children as adults will face those adults. And we must know and understand and have a knowledge of what makes the world work. President Obama has said that when you drop out, you're not just quitting on yourself, you're quitting on your country. We would take that one step further. If we turn a blind eye when kids drop out, we are quitting on them. My husband and our announcement last year of the dropout summit and movement likened it to a security risk. And it is. You have to have a high school diploma to enter the

military, because our present day services demand so much more of a soldier than just carrying a gun and slogging through the dirt. They have to be tuned into the world and to the technologies that exist in modern warfare.

Because we are in need of more young people in the military, some military installations around the country have had to start academies to give the children the academic things that they need before they can even accept them as recruits. They are actually providing the educational background so that they get a GED.

The top priority of our alliance partners is to improve graduation rates and ensure that young people are ready. Today is a special day for us to be here. It's a special day because it is the anniversary of our announcement last year of our dropout crisis. But it's special for another reason. I am pleased to announce today that the Wal-Mart Foundation has contributed one million dollars to support our dropout prevention initiative. Wal-Mart is a leader among a growing number of those in the corporate community who understand that as our children go, so goes our economy.

We all have a stake in their success. So on behalf of the America's Promise Alliance, I'd like to recognize and thank Wal-Mart for this generous group(?). And I'd like to recognize Margaret McKenna, who's here with us, president of the Wal-Mart Foundation. (Applause.) Wal-Mart joins our other major partners who have come to be with us in this initiative — State Farm, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and AT&T. Because corporations recognize that this is the future of our country and we have to invest in it.

As we look at dropout prevention, we have just released a powerful tool called Grad Nation. It gives all communities a step by step roadmap for assessing their dropout program, engaging the wider community and improving graduation rates.

In addition, Gallup has developed for us a new poll, that for the first time, will capture the voices of students themselves. This online poll will measure students' sense of hope, engagement and wellbeing, which are very reliable predictors of their success in school. And it will help communities pinpoint problems and plan responses. It will measure hope, the ideas and energy a young person has for their future, that hope that drives attendance and credits earned. It will measure engagement, a child's involvement in school, which will distinguish between low and high performance schools. It will measure wellbeing and how us how children think about and experience their lives, and tell us how our young people are doing. And this will predict their success in the future.

As of last week, Gallup had already surveyed 50,000 students. Only half say they are hopeful. And just 49% say that they're engaged. And only 26% describe themselves as hopeful, engaged, and thriving. I asked my college-aged grandson last week in talking to him about this initiative. I said, "Did you have any kids drop out of your school?" He said, "Not in my class." It was the first graduating class of a new high school in Fairfax County. He said, "No. There weren't too many people in my class. But there were quite a few in Keith's class," which was this year's graduating class, the graduating class of 2008.

I said, "Where did they live? Did they come from the poor sections of Fairfax County, surrounding"-- He said, "No. They live right around in my neighborhood." I said, "And why did they drop out?" He said, "Well, they probably-- Most of them didn't have grades good enough to graduate. And they said, 'I'm not coming back next year.' And so they're home living in their momma's basement." What do we do about that? These are the things we have to address. And we have to have the kids' voices in this.

Three years ago when we held a summit to discuss and plan our strategic plans for the next five years, in one of the workgroups, the one that was around ready for the real world and how we prepare children for the real world, there was a young man in the discussion who was a member of Youth Build, a teenager off the streets of Harlem who had been saved by Youth Build, helped with-- get a GED. He came down to participate in this program. He had to go back because he was a single father of a two year-old and he didn't have a babysitter for that night.

And as we talked about ready for the real world, he raised his hand. He said, "Wait a minute. Who's world are you talking about? Because my world is different from yours." So we have to have the voice of young people.

We have a lot of work to do. So I ask you as we go forth to keep these things in mind. There are some very successful things that are going on, and right here in this city. The Seed Academy, which is the only boarding high school charter school in the nation is here and is quite a success. It's just opened a second campus in Baltimore. It takes children from their environment because you've got to deal with the environment as much as educating them. So their solution is to take them out of the neighborhood and into the school where they're surrounded by these five promises. They have discipline and caring adults and a sense of responsibility.

I spoke at their first high school graduation and it was the happiest place I've been in a long time. The band was playing. The parents were very excited. All of these kids were going to college, every single one of them. And of the parents in the audience, nobody in the family had gone to college. Some of them

had not even finished high school. They were proud of their young people and proud of what they had accomplished. We have to ramp this up.

In New York, there's a Harlem Children's Zone. I hope that all of you are familiar with that, because it is an amazing undertaking where the founder, Geoffrey Canada, set out to impact 25 blocks around his school. He knew that he couldn't educate the children if he didn't take care of what was going on in the community, too. You do all right when you have them for a few days. But if you're sending them back into an environment that is not supportive, your work is lost. And so he began a program that impacted, first, the 25 blocks. It now covers a 100-block area zone in New York. And it impacts the entire community from birth through high school. Starts off with a baby academy where volunteers just go out and see people walking down the street who are pregnant, or they knock on the doors in apartment buildings and say, "Are you having a baby? You've got a baby? Come to the Baby College."

And young mothers came. And Dr. Theodore Brazelton and his staff of psychologists teach parenting classes. Mothers get to know each other. They come from different cultures. And here, they're able to come together and begin to understand their different cultures. Toddlers are taught in a-- They're housed in a public school, but with a special setting for these young children, two, three, four years-old. They're taught in three languages, which are the languages of the community. And they are taught abstract concepts like getting along with people, knowing the differences between people and accepting them. But at the same time, they are surrounded by the five promises — adults who care about them, their health is taken care of, they are there from 7:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the evening getting healthy food and in a warm, safe environment. And the tentacles of this reach out and it produces a great effect.

Here in Washington, the César Chavez middle and high schools, a charter school, are going to attempt to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in ward seven. And America's Promise and its affiliate are working to help them do that.

Now the connection between the five promises and success also points to why school reform is only part of the solution. We've got to address the whole child and the needs beyond the classroom. We have set national priorities to do this. We are very proud that we are seeing that four million children who are eligible for CHIP or Medicaid get enrolled and receive coverage.

Now, what does that have to do with dropouts? Well, studies show that kids who are enrolled in these programs are absent less often from school. And you can draw a direct line between absenteeism and dropouts. At P.S. 50 in New York, the only public school that is in the middle of a housing project, there's a free health clinic funded by the Children's Aid Society. They get medical and

dental care. It reduces absenteeism. It helps parents not to lose a day from work because they've got to take a child to the doctor. And they're surrounded there by all of these five things. City Year is engaged inside the school, working with teachers and helping them in their class, and providing mentors for these kids. Also in the school, there's a charter school for autistic children. And the older children mentor the children in that school.

We know that we have to do more to connect kids to meaningful futures. When you talk to dropouts, it's amazing how many of them say that they had dreams, but they went away. We know that kids begin to drop out in ninth grade. So our efforts are centered on middle school to engage them in service learning projects and to help them know how school applies to what they would like to be. Through mentors, they learn about the job opportunities that are available, and it gives them a reason to stay in school.

We need to engage parents. Many people say that that's part of the problem; parents aren't interested. Parents are interested, but you have to reach out to them and bring them into the process. And it means they get the interest and will push their children through their education. It is truly a myth that parents are disengaged.

I read an inspiring story in *The Post* the other day about Seat Pleasant Elementary School in Prince Georges County. It's a school where 70% of the children qualify for free or reduced price lunches. Yet 80% of the students in grade three through six are proficient in reading and math. If you're not proficient in reading at grade level by fourth grade, your chances of dropping go way up.

One big reason for this school success is that it stays open two extra hours each day to help students with reading and math. And even though the program is voluntary, 80% of the parents signed up their children. So that principal already knows what she will do with stimulus money she gets for her school. She will expand the program all the way down to pre-K. So let's keep in mind that if we give parents something to aim for, they will happily come and be a part of it, and engage in the community.

Finally, to change the lives of children, we must do more to rebuild a culture of service. It is through a culture of service that we can bring together a powerful weapon against the dropout crisis. I believe that Americans today, especially young Americans, are ready to respond if we call on them. They're applying for Teach For America spots like never before. They're joining AmeriCorps and the National Community HealthCorps and City Year and VISTA. And the passage yesterday of the Edward Kennedy Service America Act will empower many more young people to be a part of this solution. They deserve all of our support.

Every act of service is just a ripple. And every-- ripples multiply and become waves. And so we have to create those waves. And so to those members of the media, I give you a challenge today. Help us tell the story, but tell the good stories along with the bad. But let's keep this issue before the American public. Let us not say, "Oh, I didn't know." We have to let people know what is going on. Yesterday, or in this morning's paper reported on the dropout rate in Virginia and in Fairfax County. I think some of those numbers will come as surprise to people who read them, because even in the midst of the well-to-do communities, there's still the problem of dropouts.

So do all that you can to help more of our citizens know how serious this is. And help Americans understand that if our children are not equipped to succeed, our nation is not moving forward. But in spite of the challenges we face, I'm very optimistic today. We know what it takes and we know that together we can make the difference. With your help in keeping children before our national conscience, I believe that we will answer the call for service and come together in the true American spirit to give the promise of America to America's promise — our children.

I want to thank our wonderful staff from America's Promise. I would really be remiss if I did not recognize their efforts, these energetic, dynamic, dedicated individuals who are sitting there saying, "Who? Me?" But none of this would be possible if it were not for them. Thank you for your work. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: All right, we have a nice stack of questions here. So the first thing I'd like to ask you is, what should the folks be doing to actually help kids get through school if they're not pushing their own child through school, if they're already done getting their own child through school? How can people specifically help others?

MRS. POWELL: Well, we have many partners who would welcome your service. You can be a mentor. You can be a tutor in the school. You can go online and see what opportunities are available through MENTOR, through Communities In Schools, which is one of our most important partners. They welcome volunteers. And these are people who come into the school and supplement the work of the teachers. Those are some of the things, but there are many more online. Go online to DC Cares. There are opportunities there. Go online to see the Experience Corps that looks for people who have business experience and who are retired and they still have a lot to give. Each one of us has something we can give.

MS. LEINWAND: What responsibility do parents have to make sure their children stay in school, if parents are working, if they're out of work? And should parents be penalized in some way if their children drop out?

MRS. POWELL: Well, that's a hard one to answer. Yes, most parents want to be sure that their kids are in school. I heard a story yesterday of somebody, mother who took her child to school every day. And as she put him out at the front door, he went out the back. When I was growing up, there were people in the neighborhood who saw you and knew that you were out of school, and, "What are you doing out of school? And I'm going to tell your mama."

We also had a truant officer. I'm not sure that those are too effective today. But we need something to go and get our kids off the street who have decided, "I'm not goin'." It is a challenge. I don't know that parents should be punished. Sometimes people think that. I've heard stories of parents bearing the brunt of their children's mistakes. But I'm not sure that that's the answer.

MS. LEINWAND: What do you think of the Administration's investment in education as part of the economic stimulus package?

MRS. POWELL: Well, I think that that is a very important part of the stimulus package. And I think the President and the Congress have shown bold leadership by investing in education. This historic, one time in increasing education funding will encourage the change that is needed in schools, and a much needed change. But we have to think very seriously about what that change is going to look like. And that requires a lot of talking in communities.

MS. LEINWAND: So much of the stimulus seems like it's focused on building facilities. How will that actually impact the high school dropout rate?

MRS. POWELL: Well, we know that children do better when they're in neat, clean, bright surroundings. A few years ago, ten years ago, my husband adopted a school up off of Georgia Avenue called McFarland Middle School. When we went in as volunteers (and our church volunteers there) the clocks hadn't run in ten years. It was shabby, dirty, and nobody really cared what they were doing there.

The Marine Corps came in and helped paint walls. They built a library. Many schools in the district do not have a library. They built the shelves. And then we got book companies to donate books to put into the library. Oracle donated computers for the library. And we began to see a difference. And the day that they changed the furniture in the cafeteria and made it something that you wanted to sit on, it made an amazing difference. All of a sudden, all of the discipline problems at lunchtime sort of got all tamped down. People rise to the

occasion of where they are. That's why uniforms help them. If they have pride in how they are dressed, they will perform better. And if they are in bright, clean surroundings, they will do better.

MS. LEINWAND: Do you support the Administration's efforts on focusing on teacher quality? Would better teachers and more accountability lower the dropout rate?

MRS. POWELL: Yes. [laughter] Simple answer.

MS. LEINWAND: What do you see as the types of innovative programs that can effectively address the dropout rate?

MRS. POWELL: Well, when I go to charter schools where they seem to have a lot more imagination than they do in public school systems, I see the differences that it makes. They work to engage kids and to keep them thinking all the time. The César Chavez schools are a school for public policy. They teach public policy. I walked into a classroom where there was a discussion and a very heated discussion on, what do you think the efficacy of drug testing is? Do you think this is a good program? Do you think it is a preventive-- They had to think about it and get an answer. In order to graduate, they have to write a 20-page paper on public policy. This is teaching them to be aware of the society that they will be a part of, and to have a voice in how that policy works.

MS. LEINWAND: Charities have been one of the many casualties of the poor economy. How have your alliances' donations been affected?

MRS. POWELL: All of us are going to face some lean times with the economy. And many of our partners have indicated that there are not as many contributions coming in. Or foundations say their budgets have been cut. But that doesn't stop the need. So the rest of us have to take up the slack.

When school systems are cutting back their budget and cutting services in the school, it's going to take volunteers to go in and do that. When they've closed a library because they can't afford to hire a librarian, parents can go in and volunteer to keep that library open and be there for children who come in after school. It requires an effort on everyone's part.

MS. LEINWAND: How do you foresee the recession affecting the goal of increasing the graduation rate? Do you think that out of work parents are going to lead to more dropouts?

MRS. POWELL: That's a possibility. But it helps if we are aware of what can possibly happen and guard against it. I do notice, again reading the

papers, that more and more people who are out of work are volunteering in places that need volunteers. We do have to keep in mind how the recession and the downturn in the economy affects children. We need to hear what they think. Many of them are very afraid of what's going to happen to them. And so it is necessary to explain what's going on and to assure their security. And that takes us when their parents can't, those caring adults who are in their lives otherwise.

MS. LEINWAND: You mentioned that in other countries, children don't have a lot of free time. Do we really want our children studying every working moment without unstructured free time?

MRS. POWELL: No, we don't want to have the kind of-- We're not the kind of country that is single-minded and devoted to just one thing. Yes, China exerts a great discipline, but they also don't encourage thinking. And so we have to learn to do both things. We do need to change our school year. It's based on an agricultural society and we don't have that anymore. It used to not be a problem if young people dropped out of school in Detroit. They could go to work in the car factories. Not there. Or they could go work on the farm. Not there. So where are they going to go? We have to be sure that there are alternatives.

MS. LEINWAND: Why is the dropout rate such an intractable problem? Why should we keep hoping it will improve?

MRS. POWELL: Keep hope alive. We're defeated if we give up and say, "Doesn't matter. It's always been there. And it's always going to be." But that is not progress. We have to keep plugging away, despite the stumbling blocks that are in our way, despite the young people who have become disenchanted, are intractable. We still have to reach out and try to make a difference.

MS. LEINWAND: Many other nations give young people the opportunity to attend trade schools at age 16 and begin apprenticeships. Should the U.S. require that children remain in high school until age 18?

MRS. POWELL: Yes, they do need to stay in high school until they're 18, because there's nothing constructive for them to do outside of high school. But I do think that we need to look more at vocational training and emphasize that everybody is not going to college. But everybody has to have education beyond a high school level. And they have to be prepared for work. And vocational programs provide this.

My father was principal of a high school in Birmingham, Alabama. Everybody had to take an elective that prepared you for work. I think the thing that happens in the country is that we decided that was kind of an elitist thing of saying, "Those over there are going to college, and we're just pushing these off

over here.” But in that school, everybody had to take a trade. I have a friend in California who was an aeronautical engineer and we were discussing this. Ph.D., aeronautical engineer, he said, “I may be the only one in California that knows how to make a suit,” because he had to take a tailoring class.

MS. LEINWAND: I had to take typing. Is there a special effort to get men involved in school programs as volunteers or mentors?

MRS. POWELL: Yes. It’s necessary to have more men involved, because so many young people do not have a male figure in their life. And boys in particular need this. They have to have somebody to pattern their lives after to learn how to be a man. The philosopher, Joseph Campbell, in an interview with-- what’s his name...?-- I’m having a brain quirk. But anyway, in a series of interviews about culture, he was asked about young men in gangs.

He said, his theory is that gangs today exist because there is no coming of age ceremony for young men. And you look at documentaries, African tribes in New Zealand. And at a certain age, the men take over the lives of the boys and teach them the way that they are going to be men. They actually take them away from the women and incorporate men to their culture, to train them for-- to take their place. Young people need a figure in their lives. Young men definitely need a male figure in their lives. Young women need a male figure in their lives to learn how to relate to the opposite sex. It’s not easy.

[side remarks]

MS. LEINWAND: In a speech before Congress, President Obama made some strong comments about the responsibility that students have to finish school. What can the President do to reinforce that message?

MRS. POWELL: Well, I think he does every day. He reinforces that message by showing what an education can do for you, and where it can take you. He is a perfect example of a family that cares for their children, and who makes decisions based on the good things for their children. He is a role model and she is a role model for all of us, and certainly for young people in the African-American community. It is a shining example of who you can be if you work hard.

MS. LEINWAND: You mention that America’s Promise is reaching out to young people to get their thoughts. Is America’s Promise using new media and social networking sites like Facebook to communicate with young people and their families, community groups, and teachers, and to advance its missions and priorities?

MRS. POWELL: See my communications person back there [simultaneous conversation] David Park.

AUDIENCE RESPONSE: ...(inaudible)

MRS. POWELL: There you go. And at America's Promise, we have a youth board the meets four times a year. They come to Washington to talk about what they're doing in their communities. And two of those youth board members sit on our main board.

MS. LEINWAND: What is the key to enhancing America's societal obligation to service?

MRS. POWELL: Good examples. The perfect example is sitting over here at the table, Harris Wolford(?), who has led-- He's been the drum major for public service for a lot of years, and is responsible for many, many people being involved in public service. We do this by example. I learned to give my public service and giving back to the community from my parents before me, and they from their parents. We have to provide good examples.

MS. LEINWAND: How will the Gallup student poll you mentioned help us meet the education challenges we face? And when will the initial information be released?

MRS. POWELL: Well, they will be releasing their first information May fifth. And we will hold a conference. We hope that some of the press people will be there to hear about the things that the Gallup poll has discovered. And we will keep a public update as things go along.

MS. LEINWAND: Different ethnic communities have different dropout rates. The dropout rate is particularly high among Native Americans. What is the Alliance doing to address diversity and address the students who may come from different backgrounds?

MRS. POWELL: This is addressed through the many, many partners that we have who are at work in those communities. A few years ago, we gave an award to a Native American woman who, after a tragedy in her family, went back to the reservation to start a Boys and Girls Club. Last year in Aspen, I heard a group of-- a panel of young people talking about what they had had happen in their lives and how they came to be where they are. And all of them were very successful. One of them was a young Native American who had gone into foster care and drifted along without the foster parents understanding his religion, his totems that he carried to practice his religion. Nobody really understanding and

him constantly telling his caseworker, “I don’t need to be here. I can’t be here. They don’t understand me.”

Finally he was with a family that respected his culture. But more importantly, he was part of a Boys and Girls Club, which enveloped him and helped him grow. And now, as an adult, he is an official at that Boys and Girls Club.

MS. LEINWAND: Okay. Are you sorry your husband did not run for President?

MRS. POWELL: If he did, I wouldn’t be here today.

MS. LEINWAND: And were you surprised a black candidate won the presidency?

MRS. POWELL: No. We have always known that there were capable, very smart, very strong people in our African-American community. It was just a matter of time before the rest of the country would notice. In the beginning of the campaign, I’m sure that all of us felt, “Oh, what is this going to be?” But we saw how a superior candidate rises above the rest. And we’re looking at the young people who work with him. They’re a most accomplished group of young people. I’m not sure we’ve ever had such a well educated White House before. But I am certainly proud.

MS. LEINWAND: As a military spouse, what advice would you give to couples who are enduring long deployments?

MRS. POWELL: That’s a very big problem. And it is a crucial problem right now as deployments are so frequent. And military installations and social service organizations are having to address this. It is particularly hard for children. And a number of people are addressing this.

A civilian community cannot understand the anxieties a military family feels in a deployment. Fortunately, the military is a vast family that takes of each other. And so we surround ourselves with supports for those deployments. When my husband was a colonel at Ft. Campbell, it was in the days when young women were just beginning to come into their own, and they are-- have careers. And they don’t have time to do these little social things that wives are doing. I felt the same way when I came into the military: “I don’t want to go to a tea. Why in the world are you having a tea or coffee at 10:00 in the morning? What am I going to do with my kids? That is so frivolous.”

But when I became a commander's wife, I saw why this was important. And I said to these young wives, "We have to come together. We have to know each other. In the business that our husbands are in, they could leave tomorrow and we wouldn't know when they were coming back or if they were coming back. And if we don't know each other, how can we take care of each other?" And so the current conflicts emphasize this need even more.

The ones that I worry particularly about are the families of National Reserve and National Guard because they do not have a strong structure to absorb them. There are people who live out in the community, separated perhaps from other people who are in the same situation. So it's very important for us as a nation to be aware of this. And Mrs. Obama has said that this was going to be one of her priorities, to work with military families.

MS. LEINWAND: Okay, before we go to the last question-- We're almost out of time. I have a few matters of business to take care of. First of all, let me remind our members of our future speakers. On April 7th, the Honorable Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland and a 2008 Nobel Peace Prize winner will discuss, "Peace is a Question of Will". On April 13th, Douglas Shulman, commissioner for the Internal Revenue Service will discuss, "Tax Time Amid Hard Times". April 14th, Fran Drescher, the actress and-- She's *The Nanny* actress and president and founder of the Cancer Schmancer Movement, will discuss, "The Best Gifts Come in the Ugliest Packages: My Journey from Cancer to U.S. Diplomat".

And second, I would like to present our guest with the traditional NPC mug.

MRS. POWELL: I have my own. (Applause.) As he just said, we have lots of these, but I'm going to paint a big red 'A' on the side of this one [simultaneous conversation]. I neglected to introduce one person who is very important to us. You met her earlier, but I am proud to announce that as of today, Carmita Vaughn has joined the staff of America's Promise. Carmita was Arnie Duncan's number two in Chicago. And she comes to us in the position of chief strategic officer, to implement the programs that we want to take out into the community. She has a great deal of experience doing this, because she and Arnie were able to work some wonderful results in Chicago. And we welcome you. (Applause.)

MS. LEINWAND: And for our final question, General Powell often tells of his morning, what his morning was like on the day he retired. What was your morning like on the day he retired?

MRS. POWELL: I was overjoyed. The adjustment came later. He was used to somebody answering the door and the telephone. And the doorbell would ring and he's downstairs in his little man cave and would say, "Would you get that?" And the telephone would ring and he's on another line: "Would you get that?" So I had to develop a certain degree of independence and set out some ground rules that have worked.

MS. LEINWAND: Thank you very much. (Applause.) I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members, Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, JoAnn Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC Library for its research.

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Thank you and we are adjourned. (Gavel sounds.)

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