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**SPEECH BY FORMER PRESIDENT FW DE KLERK
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EDUCATION – THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTOR FOR HUMANITY

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to address you this evening during this - my first - visit to Panama.

Panama City is one of the great crossroads of the world - between the two largest oceans - the Atlantic and Pacific, and between the two continents of the new world, North and South America.

It is also quite a new and welcome experience for me to be able to speak on the crucially important question of education - as a critical success factor for humanity.

Most of the time I am invited to address audiences on the historic process that enabled South Africa to move from apartheid to non-racial democracy between 1990 and 1994. I am often asked what factors brought about this remarkable transformation and enabled leaders from all our communities and political parties - including, most notably, Nelson Mandela, to reach agreement after so many centuries of division and conflict.

However, I welcome this opportunity to speak about education because I spent more years as Minister of National Education during the 1980s than I subsequently did as President of South Africa.

Also, dramatic changes in education during the 1980s were one of the important - but largely unnoticed factors - that contributed to the inevitability of change in my country.

Despite many shortcomings and continuing inequality in our education system, we were able to make significant progress in the extension of high school and university education to all South Africans during the 1980s. Much of this progress had its origin in the De Lange Commission that the government appointed in 1980 to conduct an investigation into all aspects of education in South Africa.

The implementation of the De Lange Commission's reforms had a dramatic impact on education outcomes. In 1980, only 16 000 black South Africans passed our matriculation school-leaving exam - compared with 47 000 white South Africans. However, by 1994, the number of successful black candidates had increased twelvefold to more than 200 000 - more than three times the number of successful white candidates. By the same year black South Africans comprised almost 60% of all the students enrolled at South Africa's universities.



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Knowledge acquired through education was, indeed, the most real, the most irresistible and the most constructive, form of power.

The acquisition of knowledge through education is one of the factors that most clearly distinguishes our species, *homo sapiens*, from all the other species that inhabit the planet. The vast majority of species are born with much of the information that they require for survival in their genetic codes. A golden weaver bird is programmed to build its nest in a certain manner - and will retain this ability even after several generations of captivity far from its natural habitat.

Infant antelope are able to walk and follow their herds within hours of their birth. The life of insects is controlled entirely by their genetic instructions. They simply do not have the ability to learn - and changes in their behaviour and characteristics can take place only after generations of natural selection.

Not so with human beings.

Human babies are absolutely dependent on their families for survival - usually for the first 14 or 15 years of their lives. They are born with few guiding instincts. Everything that they require for survival must be learned with the help of their families and their societies - even the most basic functions of learning to walk and speak.

At the same time, they have remarkably adaptive brains that are able to encode learned experience and memories in the infinitely complex structures of their brains. The ability to understand language and acquire information from our societies through the process of education has been one of the critical success factors of our species.

Education remains a key success factor for human beings in our own time.

There is an almost exact correlation between levels of education on the one hand and human development on the other:

In the top ten countries on the *Human Development Index*, 100% of children attend secondary school and 75% go on to tertiary education;

In the top 10 middle income countries an average of 85% of children go to secondary school, while 30% go on to tertiary education;

However, in the bottom ten countries on the *Human Development Index*, an average of only 31% of children go to secondary school, while a meagre 5.6% attend tertiary education.

Education is an essential factor in a number of outcomes that are of critical importance to people.



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Education is essential for prosperity. The most important asset of any economy is a well-trained and educated population. Some of the most successful economies - Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore - are those that have no natural resources, other than their citizens. The availability of artisans and professional graduates - engineers, doctors, scientists and business managers - is a *sine qua non* for innovation, research and sustained economic growth.

Education is also a core requirement for successful democracies. Because government is ultimately in the hands of the people in democracies, it will be as competent or incompetent, or as principled or as corrupt - as the people.

Democracies will function most effectively in societies where voters are best educated in the values and institutions on which their societies are founded. They should have a good understanding of history and politics to be able to sift through the arguments and promises of the candidates that ask them for their votes. They should be wise enough to reject demagogues who promise them the world for nothing; and they should know enough to be able to resist the advertising and propaganda tricks of political hucksters.

In particular - and especially in multicultural and multiracial societies - they must be immersed in the values of tolerance and respect for diversity. As Nelson Mandela said:

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Nelson Mandela was right: in a world in which virtually all countries are becoming more multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious with each passing decade - it is of paramount importance that we should all learn to understand, tolerate and respect one another.

Finally - and perhaps most importantly - education is essential for our spiritual and intellectual development as individual men and women. A good education enables us to draw from the deep well of literature, music, philosophy, science and religion in our never-ending quest to understand the human condition. It gives us the ability to know ourselves and to make our lives meaningful.

If education is so central to our success as individuals, as societies and as countries what are the requirements for successful education systems?

In the first place, it is essential to understand that education is not only - or even primarily - the responsibility of schools and government.

Education starts in the family and the community. Strong, multigenerational families provide the firmest foundations for every child's education and development. The love, time and resources that families invest in the future of their children gives them an enormous head-



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start in life. The role models that parents, grandparents and relatives present are the most effective way of transmitting core values to the coming generation.

Communities - including religious organisations, friendship groups and sports teams also help to lay the foundations for future development. Churches, synagogues and mosques provide essential values and spiritual orientation for many children - while community leaders and sports heroes present powerful examples for future behaviour.

Unfortunately, traditional family structures and communities are under enormous pressure. The percentage of people in Europe who decide to marry has declined by 50% since 1965, while the divorce rate has doubled. Almost 60% of the children who are born in France are now born outside of wedlock. In my own country, South Africa, only 30% of our children have two parents living with them at home.

Communities have also undergone significant changes. People move more frequently; in many countries the influence of religion is waning - and most children now spend far more time on the internet than they do with their neighbours.

All of this provides the framework within which formal school education is now taking place. How can we ensure that our children receive the best possible education at school?

The first requirement is dedicated and competent teachers. Teachers should be properly trained - not only in the subjects that they teach - but more especially in the art of inspiring children and making them want to learn. They should be restored to the position of respect that they enjoyed in previous generations and should be properly paid for the key role that they play in society.

Secondly, school principals play a pivotal role. They should be carefully selected, nurtured and encouraged. Good principals ensure that teachers are motivated, parents are involved, children are meeting their goals and that schools are run in harmony with local communities.

Thirdly, the establishment of a suitable climate for learning is crucially important. There must be mutual respect between teachers, parents and children. Discipline is indispensable. Children and parents must accept that teachers are in charge in the classroom and in school. There is no place for the situation that prevails in some schools in Europe and North America where children are openly disrespectful to teachers, where they damage property and where they break school rules with impunity.

Fourthly, school curricula should concentrate on the basics, particularly at primary school. All children need a firm foundation in reading, writing and arithmetic before they go on to more challenging subjects at high school. It is also essential, in multicultural countries like South Africa, that children should receive the first six or seven years of their education in their mother tongue. This will enable them to shift to a world language like English or Spanish far more successfully once they get to high school.



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Fifthly, education should take place in an environment that is open to competition and to free choice between alternative systems and approaches. Parents should be able to choose from a selection of educational options in the private and state sectors. Competition between schools and between systems should be encouraged - since competition invariably promotes excellence - while its absence often leads to stagnation.

Sixthly, education should be geared to preparing children to excel in our rapidly changing environment. It should ensure that they are trained in rapidly developing technologies and that they are properly prepared for a future that will be very different from the experience of their parents.

Seventhly, education systems must maintain strict standards, both for educational achievement and for moral behaviour. Pressure should be resisted at all costs to dilute pass rates or to cut corners when it comes to moral standards.

Finally, education should be properly resourced. Teachers should be properly paid and schools should be equipped with all the facilities required to prepare learners for the next phase in their education or in their careers. Adequate funding is important - but it is not the solution to all the problems confronting education. Many countries have discovered that increasing education budgets does not necessarily lead to improved performance.

I wish that I could report that my own country, South Africa, has applied these principles and that it has succeeded in providing decent education for all its children. Unfortunately, we have failed to adhere to virtually every one of the abovementioned precepts - often with best intentions. As a result, we have one of the worst educational records in the world. According to the World Economic Council's *Global Competitiveness Report* our mathematics education is the worst out of the 138 countries that they survey. We also do very badly in comparative tests with other countries and perform worse than many of the poorest countries in Africa.

It is not a question of the resources. We spend 6.1% of GDP on education - one of the highest percentages in the world, amounting to almost \$1 500 per child per annum on a PPP basis. Our problem is that we have not applied the basics that I have listed above.

The failure of our education system is, in turn, one of the main causes of many of the other problems that afflict our country - including poverty, very high unemployment, unsustainable inequality, high crime levels and sluggish economic growth.

Panama, by comparison, fares better than we do. Although fewer young people attend high school in Panama than they do in South Africa, 39% go on to tertiary education compared with only 20% in South Africa. This is despite the fact that South Africa spends 6.1% of GDP on education, almost twice as much as Panama, which spends only 3.3%.

To sum up:



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Education is central to development of members of our species: we are, if you like, *homo educationis*. Without education, our brains cannot develop and we cannot survive.

Secondly, education is essential for economic and social development and for the maintenance of peaceful, prosperous and democratic societies.

Thirdly, it is the key to our own personal development as meaningful human beings.

However, education does not take place primarily in our schools: families and communities play an indispensable role.

If we wish to have successful public education systems we need;

- Well-trained and motivated teachers;
- School principals who are champions;
- A climate of learning based on mutual respect and discipline;
- Curricula that concentrate on the basics, with mother tongue education at primary school;
- Competition and a selection of education options;
- Strict educational and moral standards;
- Education for a rapidly changing world; and
- Well-resourced schools with properly paid teachers.

Unfortunately, we South Africans have not implemented these principles and as a result we are paying a heavy social and economic price.

However, of this we can be sure:

Our future as individuals, as countries and as a species will continue to be determined by the excellence of the education that we receive from our families, our societies and our schools.

Education will always be a critical success factor for humanity.