

Clinton talks about love for education

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To introduce one of his best friends, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, Dick Riley shared this story from the mid-1990s:

Riley, then Secretary of Education, was in the East Room of the White House, introducing the best teachers in the country to the nation's president.

Clinton walked to the podium and talked for a while about how much teachers meant to him.

"He paused a minute — he had no notes — then he proceeded to name every one of his teachers from kindergarten to the 12th grade," Riley said.

Their mutual passion for education was highlighted Tuesday night, when Clinton spoke for almost an hour to a sold out Peace Center to benefit the Riley Institute at Furman University.

The Institute, a center dedicated to education, leadership and economic development in South Carolina, is named for Riley, a Furman graduate who later went on to serve two terms as governor, then Secretary of Education in the Clinton administration.

Riley's friendship with Clinton goes back to when the two were elected to their first term of governor — Riley in South Carolina and Clinton in Arkansas — the same day in November of 1978.

"Bill and I had the same vision for making our states better, and all of that revolved around giving all of our children, all of our children, quality education," Riley said.

Clinton, for his part, said he still has the little silver box Riley gave him in March of 1980, when Riley invited him to South Carolina to speak at an annual dinner and put Clinton up for the night in the governor's mansion.

They've been friends ever since.

"I believe he was one of the finest governors in the last 50 years and one of the greatest cabinet secretaries this country ever had," Clinton said.

Much of his talk at the Peace Center, however, was about education and elevating teachers to advance the nation's economy.

Clinton mentioned a study done last year that said if a student "had even one truly great teacher, that one truly great teacher could increase that student's lifetime earnings by 10 percent a year, just by changing the way they thought of themselves."

As a model of public education, Clinton spoke of a school in New York, where many of the students come from low-income families. Some can't even swim when they enroll at American High School, but when they graduate, they have a specialty in one of six maritime areas and have no trouble finding a job, he said.

America has fallen behind the rest of the developed world, Clinton said. Last year, the nation had 120,000 openings for computer science degrees but only awarded 40,000.

Mexico, meanwhile, produced 113,000 engineers compared to 120,000 in the United States.

"Those are the kinds of things we have to lift above partisan politics," Clinton said. "We have to put front and center what's good for our kids."

The Riley Institute has stepped in by partnering with KnowledgeWorks Foundation to establish science- and math-focused high schools in two of the state's poorest counties.

Money being raised for the Institute's \$4 million endowment will help advance and improve public education in the state, which, Clinton said "is critical to every economic strategy you can have."