

February 5, 2009

LINDA MCMAHON -- Opening Statement

Good afternoon, Senator Looney, Representative Janowski, Ranking Members McKinney and Piscopo, and Members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. I am honored to come before you as Governor Rell's nominee to serve on the state Board of Education.

I believe that my life's experience will be an asset to the state Board of Education. As a CEO who has built a regional company into a successful global enterprise, I understand first-hand the skills Connecticut students need to obtain through education for them to be successful. As a grandmother, I have a special vested interest in the quality of education for our children.

Now, some of you might be wondering why the CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment would be interested in serving on the state Board of Education. Please allow me to explain.

A major interest in education has been a significant constant in my life. I attended East Carolina University with the goal of becoming a teacher. However, a gentleman named Vince McMahon came into my life. Vince and I were married while in college, and this changed the course of my life and my professional career.

After I graduated from East Carolina with a Bachelor of Science in French and certified to teach, Vince and I moved to Washington, D.C. He went to work for his father's company, Capitol Wrestling, and I took a position at the law firm of Covington & Burling, where I was trained as a paralegal in the Probate Department. Part of my work focused on intellectual property rights, which served me well as we built our company.

In 1982, we purchased Capitol Wrestling, a regional company that gave us the platform to build toward our vision of creating a national and, ultimately, a global media and entertainment corporation. It has taken more than 25 years of struggle and hard work, but we have achieved our vision of WWE as a successful global business. Along the way, we settled in Greenwich, Conn., to raise a family, and we established our company's global headquarters in Stamford, Conn.

As we grew our business, like most working mothers, I had the lead responsibility to ensure the education of our children. Both my son, Shane, and daughter, Stephanie, graduated from Greenwich High School. They both went on to successfully graduate from Boston University. I'm proud to say that they are part of the very talented team of executives and employees who continue to make our company a success.

I am very proud that as WWE has grown, we have been able to use our company's popularity to undertake programs to encourage young people to read, be productive members of their community, support our men and women of the military, and vote in greater numbers. Two of these initiatives might be of particular interest:

Our Get R.E.A.L. program brings WWE Superstars into schools to deliver positive messages about Respect, Education, Achievement and Leadership, and how these four tenets can help students achieve their goals. We have furthered the reach of this program through PSAs and distribution of materials such as posters and bookmarks.

An extension of this effort has been our Get R.E.A.L. READ program that targets "reluctant readers" to get them to read more often. An outgrowth of this effort has been the creation of a national WrestleMania Reading Challenge. In its third year, this program, developed with the Young Adult Services Library Association (YALSA), the youth division of the American Library Association, has grown from a high school program to also include students in middle school and grades 5-6. More than 1,800 school and public libraries are involved, more than triple the number when we started the program in 2006, reaching more than 54,000 students. Thousands of posters featuring WWE Superstars encouraging reading are distributed each year to teachers, libraries and parents across the United States. We also will again this year feature a summer reading program.

Our voter outreach program, Smackdown Your Vote!, is a non-partisan partnership to encourage more 18 to 30 year olds to vote. This program has been in effect since the Presidential election of 2000. Working with several well-known and respected partners, such as the League of Women Voters, the National Association of Secretaries of State, Cable in the Classroom, Sacred Heart University, Harvard Institute of Politics, the University of Virginia's Youth Leadership Program, and Rock The Vote, we have been able to see a steady increase in voter turnout among this age group.

In 2008, presidential candidates Senator McCain, Senator Clinton and Senator Obama provided customized video messages that were incorporated into WWE programming. All three responded to WWE's national voter issues paper for 18 to 30 year olds developed with the organizations involved in our Smackdown Your Vote partnership. More than 8,500 posters featuring WWE Superstars were developed for the University of Virginia's Youth Leadership Initiative to distribute to teachers who had signed up for the program's K-12 civics curriculum on the election. WWE partnered with Cable in the Classroom and Sacred Heart University to create 10 videos reflecting both Democratic and Republican viewpoints of college students to be used as part of Cable in the Classroom's "eLECTIONS" online game, available to more than 350,000 classrooms across the country. Those videos were hosted by WWE Superstars and Divas.

We had our WWE Superstars and Divas attend the Republican and Democratic national political conventions to encourage young people to vote, with their activities featured by prominent media outlets such as Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, NBC, ABC and CBS.

WWE also used new technology to reach young voters. Information on voter registration was delivered by Superstars Mr. Kennedy and John Cena to mobile phones across the country in a project with AT&T and Rock the Vote. As registration deadlines approached, banner ads were created to run on WWE.com and an email blast was sent to more than 600,000 WWE fans reminding them to register and vote.

As a result of these and other efforts by numerous organizations across the country, the number of young voters that came out to cast a ballot in 2008 increased to more than 52%, the highest turnout of 18- 29 year olds to ever vote in a presidential election.

As these two examples illustrate, the WWE brand is being used for more than entertainment. It has been recognized as a tool by which educators and government officials can encourage young people to improve themselves and become more engaged in their community.

In October 2004, I agreed to serve on the Board of Trustees of Sacred Heart University. It has been a fascinating and rewarding experience. Between my work at WWE expanding our educational initiatives and my experiences as a trustee at Sacred Heart, I have become deeply interested in how we are educating our children.

I am excited about the prospects of contributing to the Board of Education in developing policies that will further the education of our children and their children's children. I do not come here today with all the answers. However, I guarantee that as a member of the state Board of Education, I will be dedicated to working with my colleagues on the board, and with government leaders, the education and business communities, and the public, to develop ways we can better accomplish the goal of successfully educating all of Connecticut's children. And just as importantly, develop ways to communicate these efforts to ensure their success among all stakeholders.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.