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Keynote Address of

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at the

Consultation on Public Education

of the

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This remarkable conference

- which has brought together leadership from our most distinguished organizations
- is rooted in the deep conviction that public education in this Nation is absolutely crucial

and that our schools and democracy are inextricably interlocked.

8 In 1832, when Abraham Lincoln announced his candidacy for the Illinois State Assembly, he declared that:

"Upon the subject of education... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in."

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To the immigrants who came to this land of promise

- o It was education--rather than Ellis Island-- that was the real gateway to America.
- o To them, learning was synonymous with progress.
- o And getting an education was as essential as getting jobs.

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During the early years of this century, settlers on New York's Lower East Side were influenced most dramatically by a publication called the Jewish Daily Forward.

Its editor, Abraham Cahan--himself an immigrant-- also taught English late at night.

Cahan kept prodding the newcomers to gain an education.

"In America," he wrote, "a worker can sometimes even go to college and get an education. But it takes a long time. You must try to be an intellectual," he said "not just a doctor or a lawyer."

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Because of public education

- each new generation has moved dramatically ahead
- and we have made spectacular progress on almost every front.
- illiteracy has dropped from 11 to 1.2 percent, since 1900.

Because of education our industries have flourished.

Because of education--

- o We have cracked the genetic code.
- o We've played golf on the moon.
- o We've given the world abstract expressionism.
- o We've virtually conquered polio, tuberculosis, whooping cough, and rheumatic fever.
- o We've built a network of free public libraries all across the Nation.
- o We've led the world in biomedical research.
- o Over the past four years, the United States won 10 of the 11 Nobel Prizes in medicine and physiology.

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These dramatic leaps are rooted--not in ignorance--
but in education.

Henry Steele Commager declared that "no other
people ever demanded so much of education--none was
ever served so well by its schools and educators."

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The point is this:

America must have a network of public schools to
serve all children, not just the selected few. This
vision of universal education -- which dates to Thomas
Jefferson -- is the most audacious and enlightened dream
in human history.

And any talk about

- o deschooling our society,
- o or closing down our schools,
- o or deciding that some children should
be arbitrarily cut off from further
education--

Such talk--

--not only shockingly denies our heritage--
it also darkens hopelessly our prospects
for the future.

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Here I'd like to strike an optimistic note:

As I go about the country, I sense, in spite of the disturbing headlines, a changing mood toward the public schools -- expectancy.

There is a determination not only to support our schools but to push for excellence as well.

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Twenty years ago, America faced another kind of crisis in public education.

- o Sputnik had just been lifted into space,
- o and, near panic, many thought our schools had failed.

During this dramatic moment in our history James Bryant Conant

- o focused on both school content and school structure.
- o and the now-famous Conant report shaped our schools for decades.

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Twenty years have passed and we are now in-- what might be called--the Post-Conant Era.

During the past 20 years -- which seems more like a thousand--

- o We have become more mobile and less stable.
- o Television and travel now compete on equal footing with the classroom and the book.
- o Today Archie Bunker is better known than Silas Marner, Fellini is more influential than Faulkner, and the six o'clock news is more compelling than the history text.
- o Today students are more restless and less respectful of the school.
- o And today the old elementary, junior high and high school structure--with the 6-2-4 lock step--has largely lost its meaning.

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I'm convinced the time has come to ask again the fundamental questions.

- What are the purposes of public education?
- How should our schools be structured?
- How does education relate to our other social institutions?

I believe it's time to sort out just what the public schools can and cannot do. And focus once again on 3 fundamental purposes:

The Basic School

First -- we need a basic school -- a time to teach each child the fundamental skills and focus especially on the effective use of language.

- o After all, language -- is the connecting tissue which binds us all together.
- o Language -- gives us our identities and our meaning.
- o Language is essential to all future education.
- o All we know
 all we fear
 all we hope
 are created and conveyed -- through symbols.

And the effective use of language must be a central academic goal.

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Unhappily there are today--

- o so many ways in which language is diminished

o so many occasions which distract us from the
printed page

And in our video culture

--with its emphasis on speed and ease--language
increasingly has become more fleeting and less valued.

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It is a startling fact that today young children
watch television

4-5000 hours

before they ever go to school.

o They soak up messages and stare at
pictures without formulating messages
of their own--

--without extending their own
vocabulary

--or developing the capacity for
coherent thought.

For many of our students this has become the age
of

the flash and the zap

the hour-long epic

the 30-minute encyclopedia

the 5-minute explanation

the one minute sell

the 2 second fix.

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In this context teaching children how to read--
and also how to write and speak with clarity--becomes
at once more difficult and more crucial.

o Every child must be taught not only how to
receive messages -- but how to send them
too.

o And each child should also understand that
we communicate--not just with words--but
with

- the visual arts
- and mathematics
- and music
- and computers
- and with dance as well.

Language is essential to all future learning
and I propose that--as a National goal--every child
in school should be taught to read and write
effectively by grade four. Schooling cannot be
endlessly postponed. High schools and colleges should
not be teaching students how to read.

I'm convinced this goal is within our
reach.

After all, every child--before he or she ever goes
to kindergarten--has learned to speak, a process through
which the sending and receiving of messages is established.

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But here I must raise a flag of caution.
Schools cannot do it all alone.

Parents are the first and most important
teachers, and they must be partners in the process.

The harsh fact is that children will not
become good readers

- o if no one reads at home,
- o if our so-called "bookshelves" are
filled only with knickknacks and
plastic flowers,
- o and if TV watching is the preoccupation
of parents every night.

To reaffirm this partnership between the home
and school

- o I'd like to see parents turn off the TV
and read aloud to children, and rediscover
the beauty of the written and the spoken
word.

Good homes make good schools, and I'm convinced
this partnership must be aggressively affirmed.

The Middle School

Following this focus on the fundamentals -- which
is the means, not the end, of education -- I propose

that we focus the Middle School on a common core of study and introduce the knowledge and the understandings which all students should possess.

Today the so-called junior high school is spliced in awkwardly between two other schools and seems to have no clear-cut purpose of its own. We need to rediscover what I'll call the common core.

But let's not confuse the issue here.

- o To propose a core of study for all students is not to push for a single set of courses.
- o Nor is it to suggest a national curriculum -- a notion which is, of course, unthinkable. Education is the responsibility of the States and local school districts.
- o A core curriculum does suggest however that--as human beings--we do share some things in common and that students very early must begin to understand our heritage, gain perspective and begin to understand just how their own origins and wants and needs are inextricably linked to the origins and wants and needs of others.

T. S. Eliot reminds us of the hazards of a fragmented, shapeless education.

In the Waste Land he asks:

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images...."

Here's the point: While we rejoice in our individual differences we still must find

- o those themes and issues that unite us
...as a people.

- o We must discuss the core experiences which our schools have the responsibility to pass on. Of course we can only begin this process in the middle school. These key ideas and issues will be pursued through all the years of formal education.

But there must be a beginning.

Here I have three suggestions to propose.

First, we share a common heritage.

- o And if our schools do not help keep the past alive

- o and if they fail to introduce students to the people, to the ideas, to the literature, and to the events which have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses
- o if we do not confront our common heritage-- we not only will have lost our past, we will have lost our future, too.

Second, we not only share a heritage, we also share the challenges of a common present.

- o It has always seemed quite curious to me that so many of our educational experiments have focused exclusively--almost compulsively-- on the past, ignoring very frequently the experiences we share in our contemporary world.
- o Clearly during their years of formal education students should also look at their existence here and now, focus on those circumstances which daily shape their lives.

Again, let me suggest several examples to illustrate the point.

First, all of us are caught up in a world of social institutions: towns and villages and governments and schools and banks and clubs--and on and on it goes.

- o No education is complete unless it clarifies just how these structures came to be, how they work and how they should be changed in light of changing social needs.

On a more practical level, students should be taught how to cope with our complex culture.

- o A recent Office of Education study reports that more than 20 percent of American adults are not able to fill out forms and function effectively on their own.

I happen to believe that young people before they leave the middle school should have mastered such essential skills.

Let me suggest a third component to the middle school curriculum. Not only must we focus on our heritage and on contemporary social issues and institutions. We must focus on the future, too.

I understand that to propose a study of the future may be startling at first. But the truth is that there is no sharp distinction between the future, past, and present, and educators--all too often--have failed to grasp this essential fact.

Again it was T. S. Eliot who reminded us that

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future is contained in time past.

The harsh truth is that

- o the human race continues to expand at a rate of 200,000 people every day. That's 73 million more people every year.
- o And every day more than 800 million people face gnawing hunger, living literally from hand to mouth.
- o Tensions over resources grow more acute,
- o and the quality of our environment is threatened.

Students should begin to confront the interdependence of all life and look at the relationships among science, technology, and the quality of our life.

- o Where will we get our food, and how can it be appropriately distributed?
- o What about our energy supply, and how can it be equitably shared?
- o How can we reduce the poisons in the atmosphere?
- o Can we have a proper balance between population and the life support system of this planet Earth?
- o And how can we live together, with civility, in a climate of constraint?

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I happen to believe that today's young people are ready to think about these serious academic issues. Teaching a common core of knowledge which includes our heritage, contemporary issues, and alternatives for the future should be the central mission of the middle school.

Without the first level of learning--the fundamental skills--the work of the middle school is meaningless.

But without a middle school to follow it, the work of the basic school is chronically incomplete--a subject urgently in search of a predicate with meaning.

The Transition School

Finally, -- as a capstone to formal education -- I propose a "Transition School" --a three-year period, perhaps, in which students are offered many options and begin to move into the world beyond the classroom.

By their middle teens, most young people are restless. They are eager to break out of the academic lock step which seems a time of endless incubation -- and they mature much earlier than they did 50 years ago.

For too long we've asked all students to leap together over the same academic hurdles.

For too long we've assumed that there is something sacred about the walls of the school building.

For too long we've assumed that a student who stepped outside of the conventional academic program was irretrievably lost.

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Rigid academic patterns must be broken down. Students should begin to flex their muscles, to test their talents, and move into the learning places which can be found beyond the academic walls.

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Specifically, I propose we break up the high school into a network of smaller units.

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The pattern which I have called the "Transition School"

--recognizes that students do, in fact, differ from each other

--and that in the upper years of school they should be free to specialize

somewhat and test their unique talents

o not only in the school,

o but also in the communities outside.

I also propose that each "school-within-the-school" not only have a special focus, but also have its own off-campus connection to the outside world.

Let me illustrate the point.

- o A high school art center connection might be made, offering apprenticeships at community theatre groups, and internships in galleries and museums and orchestras;

- o A "school-business" partnership, in which local business and industry adopt a school, and provide on-the-job training for students who are eager to be out working and honing their skills;
- o A social service school with ties to community institutions so that young people could work with retirees and in hospitals and old age homes and parks.
- o A "university in the schools" concept in which a local college would offer advanced academic work to high school students -- both on the grounds of the high school, and on the campus as well.

Here I must stress one important point. High school students will continue to spend most of their time in school pursuing academic subjects. But if the basics are learned well in the early grades, there would be time in the upper grades for students to spend a half day or two per week beginning to relate education to experience beyond the campus.

What this adds up to is making all of our schools--Community Schools--places where students are in touch with learning sites in the neighborhood beyond the school and where outside groups come to the school to use the facilities and to offer their support. The school would be an open, not an isolated institution.

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Several months ago I visited Martin Luther King School in Schenectady, New York. Walking down the hall, I glanced into the library and saw an older man and a young boy sitting at a table with a book.

Upon investigation I found the man had retired from G.E. and had volunteered to come to school each day to tutor children. More than that, he had engaged a team of retired volunteers to support teachers in the school and help children with their reading.

The older man explained to me that it made no sense for him to sit at home and gripe about the schools while he had a good mind, knew how to read, and might be helpful to the schools.

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That, it seems to me, is precisely the spirit of this conference.

We have come together because we believe so deeply in the schools and we know they must be strengthened, not diminished.

We know that excellence in education is everybody's business and that the schools don't need more criticism -- they need more support.

Today, 90 percent of all the children in America-- that's 45 million students--are enrolled in public schools. That's almost the total generation that will guide the destiny of this Nation well beyond the year 2000.

- o And we must be as concerned about the quality of our schools
- o as we are about the quality of our streams and rivers,
- o and the quality of the air we breathe.

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This I am convinced continues to be the highest priority of this Nation. And because of the commitment of organizations such as those assembled here, I'm confident that public education will continue to achieve our twin goals of access and excellence for all.

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