

Address by
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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

- o It was education -- rather than Ellis Island --
that was the real gateway to America,
- o and learning was synonymous with progress.

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Because of public education

- o illiteracy has dropped from 11 to
1.2 percent, since 1900.

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.

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- 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.

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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Twenty years ago, America faced a jolting crisis.

- o Sputnik had just been lifted into space,
- o and during this dramatic moment James Bryant Conant
- o focused on both the content and the structure of
our schools,
- o and the now-famous Conant report helped shape the
Nation and rekindle confidence.

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Today we're in -- what some have called -- the Post-Conant Era.

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

- o Americans 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 clarify the purposes of public education and build a school structure for the future, not the past.

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 The mastery of language is absolutely crucial.
- o All we know
all we fear
all we hope
are created and conveyed -- through symbols.

And there is no education if students cannot use effectively the written and the spoken word.

Unhappily, in our video culture

-- with its emphasis on speech and ease -- print language is diminished, and in a curious way messages have become more fleeting and less valued.

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It is a startling fact that today

- o 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
 - without 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
write and speak with clarity -- becomes at once more dif-
ficult 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.

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Here's my point. Language is essential, and -- as a National goal -- every child should be taught to read and write effectively in what I've called the Basic School.

And I'm convinced this goal is realistic.

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

The Middle School

In addition to mastering the fundamentals -- I also propose a Middle School to focus on the general education which all students should possess.

The harsh truth is that the so-called junior high school has largely lost its meaning. It is sliced in awkwardly between two other schools with no clear-cut purpose of its own. I propose we revitalize this middle school and reconstruct something I have called the common core.

- o By common core I don't mean a single set of courses.
- o Nor do I propose a national curriculum -- which is, of course, unthinkable. Education is and must remain the responsibility of the States and local school districts.

- o However, schools must make it clear to students that--as human beings--we do share some things in common and students must learn about our heritage and 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...."

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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.

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.

And, students also 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?

I happen to believe that today's young people are ready to think about these serious academic issues. And in the future we must emphasize global education, and alternatives for the future should be the central mission of the middle school.

The Transition School

Finally--as a capstone to formal education--I propose a 3-year "Transition School."

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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The pattern which I have called the "Transition School"

--confronts the fact that students differ from each other

--and that in the upper years of school they should be free to test their unique talents

o not only in the school,

o but also in the communities outside.

Let me illustrate the point.

o I propose a high school/art center connection to offer apprenticeships at community theater groups, and internships in galleries and museums and orchestras;

o A "school-business" partnership would link local business and industry to 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 young people could work with retirees and in hospitals and old age homes and parks.
- o A "university in the schools" would offer collegiate 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.

- o High school students will continue to spend most of their time in school pursuing academic subjects.
- o But if the basics are learned well in the early grades, there would be time in the upper grades for students to generalize and relate education to experience beyond the campus.

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And this leads me to my final -- most essential -- point.

In the future we must not only change the content and the instruction but the context of our schools as well. Our schools must become community institutions with interconnections with other learning institutions.

Parents for example must once again become partners in the education process.

The harsh fact is that children will not learn at school if no one reads at home.

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

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.
- o In the future I'd like to see more parents read aloud to children, and rediscover the beauty of the written and the spoken word.

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

I also believe there must be more connections between the formal school and television teaching.

I began my speech by warning against TV as an opiate.

I must conclude by emphasizing quite another point.

Television is not a substitute for formal education

but it can extend and enrich learning, and in the future we must build bridges between the classroom and TV.

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More than one year ago, President Sadat of Egypt said in an interview -- almost casually it seemed -- that he would like to address the Israeli Parliament.

- o Hours later, satellites beamed to every inch of the inhabited earth the news of his remarks.
- o Television multiplied his comment, played and replayed it, and held him to it -- almost as a dare.
- o Only days later, Barbara Walters, Walter Cronkite, and John Chancellor arrived in Cairo to accompany Sadat on his historic trip -- almost as a way of certifying it.
- o Then, at Ben Gurion Airport, millions of viewers around the world simultaneously experienced the electric moment as an Egyptian plane touched down on Israeli soil.

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It is not to diminish what happened in the Middle East to say that

- none of the words exchanged during that visit,
- none of the speeches,
- none of the documents,
- none of the private meetings,
- none of the toasts -- was as significant as the riveting of the whole world's attention on one single, simultaneous, breathtaking, symbolic image -- two former enemies shaking hands.

The power of mass communication to extend our understanding is enormous and this great teaching institution must augment the interpretive process of formal education.

Finally, our schools need more volunteer support.

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.

On 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 the future.

We must reaffirm the fact that excellence in education is everybody's business.

Today, 90 percent of all children in America -- that's 45 million students -- are enrolled in public schools. That's the 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 such people 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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