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Transcript of

Remarks by
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ASCD MAIN ADDRESS

I'm delighted to be at this fortieth convention of this distinguished association which throughout its four decades has focused on the most essential issue: How can we advance the learning of our children? And, what does, in fact, it mean to be an educated person?

Certainly, as everyone in this room must know by now, its been just two years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education said the nation was at risk and declared that academically we had unilaterally disarmed. Then, twelve months later, just in time for the national election, the President of the United States assured us that suddenly the nation's public schools were being fixed. The truth is, of course, that our schools were never quite as bad as the hyperbole would suggest. Indeed, after we completed our own study of high schools--visiting institutions from coast to coast, spending over two thousand hours with teachers, students and principals--I became convinced that the nation's schools deserved not just D's and F's but A's and B's as well. Further, I became convinced that most school critics could not survive one week in the classrooms they so eloquently condemn. It seems quite clear to me that after all

the experts have returned to Mt. Olympus we will still have teachers and principals working with the children.

I also became convinced that in some communities, at least, the public school is the most stable, not the least stable institution to be found. We are constantly being told that starting in the 1960s the SAT scores came catapulting downward, and that's true of course, but what we're not told is that during that disturbing decade the entire nation and every institution that I know was being battered and abused. As you've just heard, during the 1960s I happened to have been in higher education. I was locked in and out of office, I was shouted down by students, I was trying to control riots on the campus, I was frequently up all night trying to decide if we could call the state police, and, I can confess here in the quietness of this windy city, that in the dark hours before dawn it did not occur to me to check the SAT's. My concern had to do with survival not the scholastic aptitude of students.

Indeed, looking back on those disturbing days, I wish I had an SAT score on higher education. Having spent some time in Washington D.C., I wish I had an SAT score on the Congress. Having heard a few speeches by Chief Justice Warren Burger about the condition of the nation's courts, I wish I had an SAT score on the judicial system in this nation. Having recently had some medical complications in our family, yet unresolved, as I am negotiating with hospitals across the country, I wish I had an SAT score on the health care system in the United States, and,

most especially on the measurement of equity as well as excellence for all. And coming closer, perhaps closer to the marrow of the bone that brings us here today, I wish I had an SAT score on the nation's families and homes.

The simple truth is that a report card on the nation's schools is a report card on the nation. Increasingly our schools are being asked to do what our families, our churches, our communities, and our homes have not been able to accomplish. So, before I turn to the special business of discussing curriculum in the schools, I propose at least two cheers for the teachers and the principals in the nation's schools who perform heroic acts every single day and who rarely get sufficient recognition for their work.

Still, I came here this morning, not just to affirm the excellence of public education, but also to look more closely at the goals of excellence that we all must commit ourselves to in the days ahead. In the remaining moments I should like to talk about four priorities--four convictions, if you will--in our search for school renewal in the nation.

First, after completing our study of secondary schools, I became convinced that to achieve excellence every school should be giving top priority to the mastery of language. We hear a lot these days about computer literacy, which has become a vogue. Its a term like "Silly Putty" that you can shape to mean anything you want. I think our focus should be not on hardware but on the symbol system that holds us all together.

In the Carnegie report, we say that language is not just another subject, it's the means by which all other subjects are pursued. Now, I recognize, of course, that this process of the development of the symbol system begins long before the child marches off to school. In fact, God helps us, it is imprinted in the genes, and, in my view, it reaffirms what the Psalmist says about man and woman being a little lower than the angels. That means we're a little higher than the rest. What sets us apart from all other creatures on God's earth, I believe, is our capacity effectively to use symbols to capture feelings, nuances and ideas. This begins not only before the child goes off to school, but my wife, who is a certified nurse-midwife insists that language begins in utero as the unborn infant monitors the mother's voice. I think, in fact, there are data to support that brash assertion. We do know that if you hold your ears and speak you can monitor your own voice through the tissue vibrations of your body. And the child in utero can, through the fluid that surrounds it, I'm convinced, monitor the messages of the mother. We also know that the child in utero has startle reflex to loud noises in the world outside and we also know that at birth the three middle earbones, the hammer, the anvil, and the stirrup are the only human bones that are fully formed at birth.

So I happen to believe my wife is right, as she always is. But for the skeptics here this morning let me say that language certainly begins with the first breath of birth, first with gurgles and then phonems that are crudely formed and then with

utterance that we call words and then sentences that convey subtle shades of meaning. Now that I'm a grandpa and can observe this process more objectively uncluttered by dirty diapers and burpings late at night, I'm absolutely in awe of a miracle that we take for granted. Expedentially it expands during the first months and years, and to see a little young one in the early moments of his or her life begin to shape and form ideas, to me, is the greatest miracle on earth.

We have grandchildren living in Japan and we visited them a year ago. They came from the United States and yet after several months, I was stunned and embarrassed for myself to discover that they were chattering in Japanese, a difficult language to master, I am told, while their parents were struggling with a few sentences, and their grandpa was trying to say hello. What is this little thing that's pretty dumb I think and suddenly at the moment of readiness can master language as easily as they breath. There is a readiness for language, I am convinced, and if we do not empower children in the use of language in the early years in my view, that failure can never be fully compensated later on.

Which allows me, then, to make this parenthetical point. The Great Debate about school renewal has focused heavily on high schools in the nation. But let the records show, the early years are transcendently the most important. And if this nation wishes ultimately to achieve excellence we will give greater priority and attention to the earlier years and start affirming elementary

teachers instead of college professors as the centerpiece of learning.

I further have great confidence in children. They master language, except those most tragically deformed. And I am convinced that any child who can speak and listen, can read and write. Because speaking and listening, demonstrates the capacity to use symbols. And reading and writing is adding visual squiggles to a symbol system already well in place. So when the child marches off to school, the task of the early teacher is not to teach the child language, that's already been accomplished, it's to build on the symbol system already well in place and to move from strength to strength.

Some of you have heard me praise her in the past, but I must do it hear again today. I must pay tribute to my first grade teacher, who in fact is speaking to you this very morning because she shaped my life forever.

It was about a hundred years ago in Southwest Ohio when my mother and I walked off to school together and on the way, my first day of school, I said "Will I learn to read today?" And my mother said "No, not today, but you will before the year is out." I've often thought of the question that I asked. I think many children go to school to learn to read. They want to break the adult code and find out what all the secrets are about. I don't know about your parents but mine had this exasperating habit of writing notes to one another and as they say in Washington, my brothers and I weren't in the loop and we wondered

what all the impending doom was being said. But I wanted to learn to read, to break the code. My mother said "No, not today," but she didn't know Miss Rice, my first grade teacher. I walked into the room and there she stood, half human, half divine. In fact for months, I just assumed Miss Rice ascended into heaven in the afternoon and then came down the next day to teach the class. To add to the mystic she was called a "maiden lady". A public policy was such that it was against the law to be married and teach in Dayton, Ohio a hundred years ago. I never quite understood it. It had something to do with not mixing business and pleasure, I understand.

In any event, after a, if you'll forgive the term, pregnant pause Miss Rice looked at 28 frightened, awestruck, anticipating children and said "Good morning class. Today we learn to read." First words I ever heard. And not one child said "No, not today let's string beads." I mean if Miss Rice said you learned to read you learned to read. We spent all day on four words--I go to school. We traced them, we recited them together, we sang them and we had a little prayer even--"Oh God, thank you. I go to school." May the Supreme Court forgive her, or someone. I did hear incidently that the one prayer in school thats acceptable to all faiths is "Dear God, don't let her call on me today." Well, I ran home that night 10 feet tall and I announced proudly to my mother that today I'd learned to read. Truth is I'd learned to memorize that day. But Miss Rice had taught me something much more fundamental. She taught me that in

our search for excellence, language is the key. And I find it rather marvelous and mystical as well that fifty years later, in Chicago the influence of that unheralded woman lives on. And she even shaped the priority in our report. The influence of a teacher endures forever.

In the Carnegie report we also give top priority to writing which I believe is perhaps the most important and most neglected language skill. Not because we live in a writing culture--we live in a talking culture. I stress writing because I believe writing is frozen thought and it's the means by which clear thinking can be taught. I often hear the words "critical thinking" teaching. I don't know how to do that except through the expression of language that students make through writing and then with teachers who can help them start and start again through the analysis of their work. How many times have you said I know exactly what I think only to try to put those thoughts on paper and discover that where you thought there was brilliance there was only mush. Students put their thoughts on paper and teachers must have time, carefully, to critique their work and then it seems to me critical thinking begins, carefully, to emerge. But without that time, the effort, it seems to me, is inconsequential and does not lead to the outcomes we have in mind.

So I happen to believe, as we say in our report, that every student before he or she graduates from high school should be asked to write a thoughtful, coherent statement on a

consequential topic. To me it is the only measure of an educated person, the SATs perhaps being the worst of all. And if after 12 years of formal education students cannot write English prose with clarity and conviction then I suggest we lock the doors and start again.

And may I indulge myself one further moment on the centrality of language. I happen to believe that our students in the schools should learn that we communicate not only verbally but non-verbally as well. In fact, I'd like to say a word or two for silence--not to keep order but to help students reflect on the meaning and the messages that they heard. We live in a culture where noise is honored as the norm and silence brings embarrassment to the room. My grandfather had it just the other way around. He assumed that silence was the norm and you only interrupted when there was something consequential to convey. But we live in a world where even in elevators music has to be piped in to make sure we don't get uncomfortable with silence. I believe silence provides spaces for our messages and therefore could be honored in the early years as a context, not for order, but for learning.

I don't know if you've been to Japan and seen some of the majestic gardens that they have. The ones that I like most are the ones where there's a large space, perhaps as large as the carpeting in the front before me, with nothing but finely raked gravel (beautifully small stone) around and in the middle is a magnificent rock, positioned beautifully in the center. The rock

becomes a work of beauty because it's surrounded by the silence of the spaces. Left alone or cluttered it would go unnoticed. In the beauty of the island of the space that's been provided it's something to be honored and enjoyed. So it is with words and ideas, too. I say two cheers for silence which is a means of communication in reverse.

I also, perhaps less mystically, would like to say a word or two for music, dance, and the visual arts, which are, in fact, the powerful means by which we convey feelings and ideas that words themselves cannot fully capture. The means by which we define a civilization, in my view, is to be measured by the breadth of the civil systems that we use. We communicate, not just with grunts and groans--what we call the word--but with the power of dance, music, and visual arts, that very often can send feelings and meanings that words cannot convey.

I was in some now forgotten airport about 6 months ago reading an interview in the New York Times with Victor Weiskoff nobel laureate in physics. He was discussing the "Big Bang" theory (which I never fully understood) and near the end of the interview he said "if you wish to understand the 'Big Bang' theory (and I did), listen to the works of Hyden." I thought the New York Times had dropped a line and I went to read again. But there it was. What's going on here? A nobel laureate in physics suggesting to the reader to understand the "Big Bang" theory you don't need a mathematical formula, you don't a advanced degree in physics, you don't need words--go off in the corner and listen to

the works of Hyden. He's saying that some understandings are so profound that words will not suffice. The key to understanding the power of this insight is to listen to the welling impressions and emotions that only Hyden can convey. I found that a stunning affirmation of the role of the arts as a symbol system in our culture.

Murray Sidlin, the conductor of the New Haven Symphony, wrote on one occasion that when words are no longer adequate people turn to art. Some people go to the canvas and paint, some stand up and dance, but we all go beyond our normal means of communicating and, he said, this is the common human experience for all people on this planet. It's interesting to me that when dictators wish to control the hearts and minds of men and women, they not only censor speech, they also censor music, dance and the visual arts. Why? Because they know through these channels of communication we can shape feelings and ideas and even propaganda can be sent to others. I hope that our school board trustees are as intelligent as dictators in understanding that the arts are not a frill, they are at the center of civility and help shape our lives as human beings. They are communication at its best.

Here then is my conclusion on the matter of language. As the centerpiece of learning, excellence, I believe, is to be measured not by the SATs but by the mastery of language and by the ability of our students to communicate with care. In this great debate about school renewal, if I had one wish it would be

that every child during his or her first day of school would hear some teacher say, "Good morning class. Today we learn to read." And that class would be on the road to excellence throughout their whole career.

This brings me to the second issue, and it's perhaps at the heart of ASCD's work. I believe for excellence to be achieved we must have a balanced core-curriculum for all students. The National Commission proposed a core curriculum, if you recall. They called it the "new basics," which quite frankly sounded very old to me. My father is now 86. He graduated from high school in 1917. About a year ago, I happened on his high school report card and I can report to you today that almost seventy years ago my father had four units of math, four units of history, four units of English, and he was surprised when I said that these are the new basics in the nation's great debate.

The harsh truth is that we're mindlessly adding more Carnegie units to the requirements for graduation without asking what it means to be an educated person and without asking what's behind the label. The great debate, it seems to me, has been absolutely superficial because its been controled more by politicians then by educators in the classrooms.

During our own study of the American high school, and this won't surprise you, but I have to say it, we found that an English course can mean anything from American Literature to Creative Conversations, a math course can mean anything from algebra to a course called Numbers, and a course in U.S. History

even can be anything from the American Revolution to Urban Studies. I did not propose a rigid curriculum for all students, but I must say that I am deeply troubled by the way we confuse Carnegie units with excellence in education. I am also deeply troubled that we think that another unit in math, or another unit in science, or another unit in history, or another unit in English will adequately prepare our students for the dangerously interdependent world they will inherit. To put it quite frankly, we are building a curriculum today not for the future but the past.

It's significant that during 1983, in addition to all the reports on education, three other major reports were released that I think are relevant to the curriculum discussion we're having here in Chicago today. One of these reports was from the National Academy of Sciences that spoke about the so-called greenhouse effect, a gradual warming of the earth's atmosphere caused by an increase of carbon-dioxide in the air. Do our students know anything about that fundamental issue of survival? Another report from an equally prestigious body predicted a nuclear holocaust could plunge half the earth into freezing darkness. Is it possible to inquire into alternatives in the future without having us charged inappropriately for political bias or favoritism in the issues we confront. And a third report said that many living species face extinction because of the deforestation of tropical forests being destroyed at the rate of about 100,000 square kilometers every year. Could our students locate the tropical forests on map?

The harsh truth is that students remain shockingly ignorant about our world and the curriculum is becoming increasingly more parochial at the very moment the human agenda is more global. Some years ago a group of high school students surveyed thought Golda Mier rather than Anwar Sadat was the president of Egypt. And in 1982 only 2 states mandated a course in non-western studies for high school graduations.

College students are in trouble too. In a recent study conducted at The Carnegie Foundation, we found that one out of every four college seniors said that they had almost nothing in common with people in underdeveloped countries. One out of three said they were not interested in international relations. And last year about 40 percent of community college students surveyed in California could not locate either Iran or El Salvador on a map. We're educating our students, it seems to me, inadequately for an interdependent world they will inherit.

In 1972 in Albany, New York, I was shuffling through my third class mail, which is a devise I have to create the illusion of being very busy when I'm eager to escape the toils of the day, and I discovered that on top of that impressive pile was the Stanford Student Newspaper. The headlines read that the faculty at Stanford had, after abolishing all requirements several years before, introduced a required course in western civilization, a burst of creativity I thought. Then I noticed that the editorial page had moved to the front because the students were so disturbed by this brash act of the faculty of Stanford. The

student editors attacked vigorously this newly required course. The editorial said, among other things, that requirements are illiberal and then the editorial concluded with this blockbuster statement: "How dare they (the faculty)," the students argued, "impose uniform requirements on nonuniform people."

I was both amused and then deeply troubled by that statement. I was startled to discover that some of the nation's most gifted students after fourteen years of education did not understand that while we're certainly nonuniform, this is not to suggest that we do not have anything in common with each another. They had failed to understand that while in a pyschological sense we live in isolation, in a fundamental sense we are dependent on each other. The truth is that while we are all alone we are also all together. And in my judgment students must discover both sides of our existence.

Indeed, my view of the goals of education are very simple. I believe there are just two objectives for the nation's colleges and schools. On the one hand we want to make it possible for individual aptitudes and abilities to be developed so that students can live with confidence and independence and draw fully on their talents. That's education objective number one. The second objective however is equally essential and that is to discover our connection with each other so that we can live socially, civically, spiritually in tune with those about us. Both of those objectives must be discovered and the curriculum must affirm both our independence and our interdependence, too. And that's the goal of common learning.

Several years ago my wife and I flew from JFK airport in New York to Central America. Traveling to a Mayan village we had traveled a thousand years and a thousand miles. We were visiting our son and his Mayan wife. We spent the evening around an open fire with our new in-laws. I must tell you that for some moments adjusting to that sharp transition I wondered if we had anything in common. What has JFK airport have in common with a Mayan village. But as the embers died I discovered we could communicate with one another, nonverbally in large measure, but verbally as well. We could talk about community since the Mayan villagers have laws and morays and traditions of structure I too understood. We could share beauty of the arts since the Mayan arts have been with us for a millenium or more. We could recall the past, which is a human characteristic that we assume no other species on God's earth can fulfill, because the Mayans were here a thousand years. We could talk about our relationship with nature because the Myans live very close to earth and know their dependence, their ecological dependence, on the planet earth. We could talk about our work since people all around the globe are engaged in consuming and producing. This was not a foreign land. I discovered another human being with an agenda similar to my own.

Now its true the format had its differences to be sure. Take work. My son's father-in-law could explain to me how he walked off into the fields each day and slashed and burned and grew the crops and brought them home. It took about an hour to

explain how I ran to airports carrying paper from place to place. As he said, "You call that work." Then, of course, at the most fundamental level we could share our human joys and sorrows, the touch point at which all humans live.

I am suggesting then, that in the Carnegie report we call for a core of common learning which we define as the study of those experiences and traditions and ways of living that are common to all people on the planet earth. And what are they? The way we share and use symbols in our connections with each other; the way we have a sense of history, where we've been and where we're going, which is the unique condition of the human species; the way we participate in groups and institutions which is found in every culture of the world; the way we have a relationship with nature which we better fully understand, and the way we're all engaged in producing and consuming that is directing our energy toward some common good.

Dr. Lewis Thomas of the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York said on one occasion that if this century does not slip forever through our fingers it will be because learning will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and will have helped us focus on our common goals. I am suggesting that in our great debate on excellence we need language which is the fundamental tool of learning but we need a core of understanding and our educators should come together to focus not on Carnegie units but on those univeral human experiences that bind us all together. This is common learning. I submit that if educators

do not ask the question: What does it mean to be an educated person?, the politicians will define it for us and I believe our children will, in the process, be imperiled.

Let me then, make one final point about the students, if I may. It's curious to me, that in the great debate about school renewal hardly any of the reports have mentioned students. It's as if we can fix the schools and ignore 40 million children. It's kind of crazy in my view. I reached that conviction after we finished our own school studies and felt strongly that we have not just a school problem, but a youth problem in this nation and unless Americans starts looking at the condition of the family and the quality of youth there will be no way to have vitality within the public schools because we are being influenced by the pathologies outside.

We heard time and time again young people say in one way or another that they felt unneeded and unconnected to the communities of which they are a part. In fact, the school has become about the only place where it's O.K. to be a teenager in our culture, except perhaps the shopping malls where young people can wander around for days and never be noticed by adults. One young woman in a midwest high school said to us that last summer she had found a job working at McDonald's. She said it didn't pay too well, and it wasn't too demanding but she said at least I felt needed for awhile. Frankly I find it sad that feeling needed means pushing big Macs at McDonalds.

And may I say here, parenthetically, that two nights ago, in watching ABC news special report in my home there was an 8-minute feature on the surge of ROTC commitments among the young people. There are higher enrollments now than in 30 years. One young woman, 15, was asked why she had joined and she said "well we get to play with guns and stuff." I think there is a problem of vision and inspiration where young people are searching for a larger commitment to be made.

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between the older and the young. No society can remain healthy if the generations are not in touch with one another. Yet we are expecting to put children in school until they're old enough to walk out and be adults.

My parents are retired (as I mentioned) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The average age is 80 in that community. My father, who is 86, said almost sullenly a couple a weeks ago "It's not a big deal to be 80 here." He sort of felt unhonored, like Mr. Dangerfield. No respect. But the beauty of that place is that they also have a daycare center there. Fifty 4 and 5 year olds come trucking up each morning and if that isn't a way to retire I don't know what is. They come bouncing in and to add to the excitement the children have an adopted grandparent. They

may go in the morning to greet the older person. I think there is something powerful and beautiful about a four-year-old who starts the day by seeing the courage and agony and the determination of someone who is in the sunset of his life. And I think there is something beautiful about an 80-year-old who begins the day by being greeted by a four-year-old who's bright and innocent and filled with vigor for the future. The connections are vital if the world is to become a healthy place.

I mentioned Miss Rice as one of my outstanding teachers. I should have mentioned Grandma French, my mother's mother who lived with us for 20 years. It was Grandma French who met me at the closing of each day and heard my hurts and sorrows and rejoiced when I had a victory or two to share with her. I am suggesting then that I believe it's really quite tragic for young people to finish high school and never be asked to participate responsible in life. Never been encouraged to spend time with older people, never help a child who hasn't learned to read, or even pick up litter on the streets.

So in the Carnegie report we did a careless thing. We suggested a new Carnegie unit, and since we invented that unhappy term 60 years ago I thought we could push it any way we wished. The new Carnegie unit is a service term. A suggestion that young people, during their four years of formal education, might be asked to volunteer to work in libraries, or parks, or hospitals or in museum centers or perhaps to help tutor children in the school. I think part of the service could take part in the

building itself so that young people feel a part of school instead of drifting from it. We go that idea from several schools we visited.

During one interview I talked to a big six-footer, sixteen year old who said: "Yes last summer I volunteered in the emergency ward at the local hospital." He said in the evening they brought in a three year old who had meningitis and the next morning she was dead. Then he looked at me with skepticism and said, as only a grown up can do, "Do you know what it's like to see a little kid die." He was strong enough, informed enough, emotionally sensitive enough to challenge me on my terms. What he was really saying have you grown up and do you know what life is like? I think for teen-agers to begin to understand the realities of living is part of learning too.

Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion that it's the worlds one crime its babes grow dull. Not that they sow but that they seldom reap. Not that they serve, but have no god to serve. Not that they die, but that they die like sheep. I believe our young people should know the tragedy of life is not death, the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions undeclared, and with service unfulfilled.

While we're talking about the curriculum in the schools we should talk about the connection between learning and the life outside because if we do not make authentic connections it becomes a ceremony not a way of life. We have banquets in our schools to honor those who defeated someone in athletics. Is it

unthinkable to have banquets in our schools to honor those who have helped someone urgently in need.

Final footnote to these remarks. We need language as the source of learning, we need a core to broaden the knowledge, we need students who see connection between what they've learned and how they live but I think we must urgently recall that we should stress not just for excellence but for equity as well. And I really am worried that this great debate may raise standards and in the process lose students. What a final irony that would be. Our goal here is not simply to add more hurdles but to get better in our education of all children. If that's not the focus we are going to end this great debate with more failure not more achievement which would be the final irony of all.

I don't know if any of you saw Bill Buckley interviewing Mortimer Adler on his program Firing Line about a year ago, but they were talking about equity and excellence and arguing back and forth. Near the end of the program Buckley, in frustration, turned to Adler and said "Mortimer what makes you think all children can learn." And Mortimer, never at a lose for words, stuck his finger in Buckley's face and said "Well Bill, I don't know that all children can learn. But on the other hand, you're not absolutely confident they can't. So he said, I'd rather live by my hope then by your doubt." And I thought--sic em.

This then is my conclusion. This I believe is an exciting moment in American education and I am convinced that we have the best opportunity we'll have in this century to improve the

nation's schools. But I also believe that if the school debate is to be serious and sustained we should give priority not to hardware but to the centrality of language. We should define a core of learning not on the basis of Carnegie units but the way it interrelates the fields of study toward the future our students will inherit. We should focus on the students themselves and help them see the connect between what they learn and how they live and we must commit ourselves not just to excellence but to equity as well.

James Agee our twentieth century American author wrote on one occasion that with every child who is born under no matter what circumstance the potentiality of the human race is born again. I believe this association is dedicated to that potential and the educators in this room affirm it every day.