

9TH CONFERENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY  
URBAN NATIONAL TASK FORCE

Remarks by  
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*Final -*

*will be put  
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### INTRODUCTION

It's been four and one-half years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Since that hyperbole hit the headlines, this nation has engaged in the most serious and sustained bipartisan drive for school renewal in our history. Thanks to governors, educators and legislative leaders--including many assembled in this room-- education has been at the top of the national agenda, and I applaud the remarkable progress that we've made.

Still, the report card is very mixed. The reforms have been working fairly well for schools that are already stable and advantaged. What I worry about are the urban schools and schools that serve the rural poor. If we do not find ways to develop a radical, new agenda for schools that are serving the least advantaged students, this reform movement will have failed at its most essential task. History will not look kindly on our efforts if with all of our talk about renewal we simply benefit the most advantaged.

During the last eight months we at the Carnegie Foundation have been in six cities across the country looking at the schools. We asked: Is the reform movement working in our inner cities? My conclusion is that many urban schools are imperiled and that the strategies now being introduced are not adequate to

the problem. There are no easy answers. If there were, we would have found them long ago. Still, I do have several priorities for every urban school that may serve as a framework for discussion.

First, there is no way to talk about urban education without confronting the problems of the poor. Poverty and education are inextricably connected. And it is shocking that for the past decade we have not placed the highest national priority on confronting poverty among our children. In 1985, the poverty rate was 20.5 percent, or one in five, for children under 18. The poverty rate for children under six was 23 percent.

Malnutrition affects almost a half-million children in this nation. The report of the Physicians Task Force on Hunger in America documented the issue. Mothers and babies who are nutritionally deprived will, in later years, be intellectually and academically deficient. If we do not understand the linkage between good nutrition and good schooling we have failed to make a connection that is absolutely crucial.

If I had one recommendation for reform, I suggest we start by talking about nutrition. A top priority must be full funding of federal child nutrition programs. Our educational problems cannot be divorced from the problems of the poor. And if we do not understand that, we do not understand the future of this nation. Winston Churchill said on one occasion that "there is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies." And this is a far higher priority than putting weapons systems into space.

Second, to be successful, urban schools must give priority to pre-school and early education. The early years are crucial. It is there in the first years of formal learning that the foundation will be laid. It's not that we cannot compensate later on, but I do not believe that we can fully compensate and surely the task of education is far more difficult if the child has been deprived in the early years.

The time is not far off when pre-kindergarten programs will be available for three-and four-year olds, as the nation's governors recommended. Did you think you would live to see the day when governors would urge schools to enroll students who are three years old? Incidentally, may I say that the governors' report is both enlightened and certainly important. This document speaks in the imaginative and creative ways about pre-school programs. The point is that we must give top priority to pre-school and early education programs that also involve parents.

The state of Missouri has launched a model program, one that serves parents of preschool children. We need a national policy to give parents time off from work occasionally to participate in the education of their children. After all, we give time off to vote and to serve jury duty; surely excellent education is a civic obligation, too.

Further, to strengthen urban education we should reorganize the first years of school. I would like to see a non-graded unit--kindergarten through grade four--in which children would not be moved along chronologically but would move primarily on

the basis of their linguistic proficiency. The goal of this "Basic School" would be the language empowerment of each student.

The focus of the Basic School would be on language--on the reading of stories, the telling of stories, the writing of stories. There would be room for the arts as well. And, as the governors recommended, class size would be strictly limited. You cannot have urban grades of 20 or 30 children and expect a teacher to give personal attention to each student. So, if I had my way as secretary of reform, I would reorganize the early years and have a non-graded Basic School. I would insist that there be no more than 15 students for every teacher and that great priority be given to proficiency in language.

Third, to improve urban education the school calendar must be changed. The day is not far off when we will have to reorganize both the school day and the school year in order to reflect the changing work and family patterns in the nation. When the current school calendar was organized a hundred years ago almost all families were living on farms. Children had the summer off to help tend the crops. We are now living with an obsolete school model that does not fit the reality of home or work life. Today, almost all families have parents who are working and many are headed by single parents. The school has an educational and a custodial function to fulfill. And it seems absolutely clear that between now and the year 2000 we will have a radically reorganized school calendar that will reflect the realities of changing work and family patterns. Instead of nine

months of classes and then three months off we might have shorter terms of three months and then a week to ten days off--a time for teacher renewal and teacher development.

I also see the urgent need to have afternoon enrichment programs in every school optionally available for any family where the child is not cared for after school. This is an essential response to the latch-key problem or, stated more directly, the "street drift problem" in the urban community. We also need enrichment programs in the summer for children whose parents are not able to pay for such opportunities.

I would argue strongly for a new chapter in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would provide federal vouchers for every poor parent so that they could secure afternoon enrichment and summer services for their children if they are not otherwise cared for. Families who can pay for these extra services should pay for them--at fees that will make the activities self-supporting. I'm suggesting that it's high time we start adjusting our public policies to accommodate the changing school and family patterns of the nation.

Fourth, there is the matter of school size. We must find ways to break up large schools into smaller units. Some of the warehouses we call schools are frighteningly overcrowded, impersonal places. And, if I were to choose one illustration of the breakdown of the urban school, it is the climate of anonymity found in high school today. As the students move into junior and senior high school they become faceless and nameless at the very moment they need their identity established. Again, if I were

secretary of school reform, I would break up large schools into small academic villages and insist that every student throughout all of his or her education, be known and supported as a human being by at least one adult.

The fifth priority is to combine service, work, and learning. We need more flexible relationships between schooling and the world outside. It is shocking that seventeen and eighteen-year-olds are still being confined to schools, moving in rigid lockstep from eight o'clock to three o'clock, just as they did when they were four and five years old.

I would like to see the last two years of high school converted into a what might be called "transition school"--an arrangement in which students spend part time in school, perhaps part time in work, and part time in service. Some might even spend time taking college courses.

Further, these flexible arrangements should provide for easy reentry for those who have dropped out. What we have now is a structure where students become nonpersons once they leave; there's no way to get back into the system. Young people should have available more flexible alternatives--especially young mothers who have perhaps dropped out because of childbirth.

This priority, too, has been stated often, and the Carnegie Forum report addressed it splendidly. That is, we are not going to have better schools in the urban areas until we give more autonomy to and expect better accountability from the local schools. They go together. What we have now are more regulatory obligations but less autonomy; it simply will not work. The

rigid system will defeat the most gifted and enterprising teachers and drive principals to despair. What I am suggesting is that we give greater freedom to the schools but hold them accountable not on process but on the basis of outcomes, and we should define those outcomes very clearly.

I would add a related point. If, in three to five years, a school has not improved, we need an intervention arrangement. If a year after year, a school is not able to educate its children, it cannot be allowed drift. The crisis calls for outside intervention, carefully guided to be sure, based on criteria that have been well-established.

Is there any good news in all of this? There is, in fact, good news because, as far as I can tell, we are all agreed that the problem is very urgent. And, as far as I can tell, we all are in agreement upon the strategies to be pursued. Is it conceivable there is an unwillingness to act?

It's unthinkable that America will not declare that by the year 2000 the children who enrolled in school this year will leave high school with a quality education. To do less will shatter lives and imperil the future of our nation.