

TEACHING IN AMERICA

Remarks by

**Ernest L. Boyer
President**

**The Carnegie Foundation for
the Advancement of Teaching**

**Kansas-National Education Association
Wichita, Kansas**

October 28, 1988

INTRODUCTION

As everyone in this room must know, its been 5 1/2 years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the nation is at risk.

And concluded that

"If an unfriendly power had imposed on the United States the mediocre education system that we have today, we would have considered it an "act of love."

As the Commission said, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves . For a century and a quarter the membership of this association has inspired generations of young students with remarkable skill and dedication.

And its a special joy for me to be with you today.

I also want to tell you how much I admire the superb leadership Mary Futell is bringing to the association--she is one of the most influential educational leaders in the nation.

During this period--

- academic standards have been raised
- testing has increased
- teacher salaries have gone up at twice the inflation rate

and I propose two cheers for the progress that we've made.

But with all of our achievements--and they've been quite substantial--I see a dark lining to the silver cloud.

The harsh truth is that while Americans continue to have a "love affair" with education, we are--at the same time--"enormously ambivalent" about teachers.

Dan Lortie at the University of Chicago put the issue squarely when he said

Teaching in this country is--at once--both honored and disdained.

It's praised

as dedicated service, and
its also "scornfully dismissed" as "easy work"

The hard fact is, Dan Lortie said

our real regard for teaching in this country has
never matched our professional regard

Several years ago when we were writing a report on high schools at The Carnegie Foundation, I read a fascinating study about a nineteenth-century Nebraska school that colorfully described our lack of "real regard" for teachers.

The writer said that 100 years ago at this little one room school house on the Nebraska prairie

- the first teacher was run out of town by boys who used stones as "weapons" of assault.

The writer said that

- the second teacher, met the same agony.

But the author concluded this sad tale by saying that

- when the third teacher had "soundly thrashed" one boy and had also "thrashed the father of another, the reign of terror ended. Parents need chastizing, too.

Still, the writer said, many students at that Nebraska school considered the teacher Public Enemy #1.

Today, we don't stone our teachers or openly run them out of town.

But we do expect them to do what our homes and churches and communities have not been able to accomplish.

Teachers today are called upon not only to teach "the basic," but also

- to monitor the playground
- to police for drugs
- to reduce pregnancy
- to teach students how to drive
- to eliminate graffiti

And when teachers fall short anywhere along the line we condemn them for not living up to our "idealized" expectations.

And yet in spite of this, I'm convinced that most "school critics",

could not survive one week in the classrooms
they so vigorously condemn!

During our study of the American High School we visited
dozens of classrooms from coast to coast.

And it became quite clear to me that the basic problem
was not salaries or fringe benefits, although salaries must
keep going up.

The basic problem I concluded was the various conditions
of the teachers with

- too many students
 - too much paperwork
 - too little time for preparation
 - too many mindless interruptions.
-

And it is also seemed "quite clear" to me that

the PA system has become a symbol of all that's gone wrong in public education--it's a system that's often more concerned with procedures than with people.

I was in one class where the PA system "belched out" its' mindless messages three times in fifty minutes.

And yet the teachers was expected to smile and ignore the fact that she was being rudely interrupted!

And that students were being distracted from their learning.

I'm suggesting that for the reform movement to succeed

we don't need more rules and regulations
we need more teachers and more status for our teachers.

At the Carnegie Foundation, we've just surveyed 2200 teachers from coast to coast.

And nearly one-third say they have no role in shaping the curriculum at their school.

Over 50 percent do not participate in planning their own inservice education programs.

Seventy percent are not asked to help shape the retention policies at their school.

And over 60 percent are not involved in deciding which students will be tracked into special classes--70 percent less involved.

Is it little wonder--50 percent said morale is worse than five years ago. Twenty-two percent said its _____.

Frankly, I find it ironic that while American Industry talks about involving workers in decisions, school reform in the United States is moving in just the opposite direction.

In all too many states we're trying to impose excellence from above. When, in fact, it can only be accomplished by inspired teachers who meet with children every single day.

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, I called together twenty high school students from around the country. We spent the day talking about schools and how they should improve. Near the end, I asked the students to grade the teachers they had had--from A to F.

When everyone had responded we ended with an above average grade--a solid "B" at least. And all student said that they had at least one teacher who was "absolutely tops"--someone who had changed their lives forever.

Then I asked the crucial question: "How many of you ever thanked a teacher?" Not one hand went up! As one student put it, "It's just not the thing to do." These high school students had been with teachers very day for four years and yet not once--even after an exciting session--did a student stop by the teachers desk and say thank you very much.

I'm suggesting that great teachers live forever!

Several years ago, I couldn't sleep. Instead of counting sheep I counted all the teachers I had had.

I remembered, "rather vividly," fifteen or more--few nightmares in the bunch.

I then tried to think about the great teachers, the truly outstanding individuals--in college or in school--who had touched me or truly changed my life.

First, I thought about Miss Rice, my first grade teacher, who, on the first day of school, said

Good morning class, today we learn to read.

It was Miss Rice who taught me language and learning are inextricably interlocked.

I recalled Mr. Wittingler, a high school history teacher, who one day said quietly as I passed the desk,

"Ernest, you're doing very well in history--you keep this up you just might be a student."

It's true of course that we have "poor" teachers in the nation's schools.

I'm convinced that the teaching profession must vigorously police itself.

But its also true that no profession is made healthy by facing only what's bad.

And now that we have a new Secretary of Education in Washington, DC, I only hope that we can once again begin to view teachers as the solution--not the problem.

And begin to give them the time or the tools they need to do their job.

But let the record show that none of these important moves would have been accomplished without the aggressive leadership of the Kansas chapter of the NEA.

Again, I salute the vigor and the vision of this magnificent organization which for a century and a quarter has been committed to excellence for all children!

But there is still much more to be accomplished.

And in the end, I'd like to see teaching excellence become a national crusade. I'd like to see this nation be less concerned about getting weapons system into space and more concerned about supporting teachers here on earth.

Specifically, I'm convinced we need a teacher innovative trend in every school to help teachers quickly implant a good idea.

We need a teacher travel fund in every school so teachers can go to conferences occasionally and be intellectually _____--something college professors simply take for granted.

We need summer fellowships for teachers--like the one President Eisenhower introduced after Sputnik twenty years ago.

And speaking of the Presidents I have another suggestion to propose. Annually we select in every state a "teacher of the year."

Next year when these master teachers come to Washington, DC, I propose that the President of the United States host them at a dinner in the East Room of the White House, like we do for visiting dignitaries from abroad. I propose that we televise the event on prime time for everyone to see.

Further, I propose that the President addresses the nation on the dignity of teaching.

And I also recommend that several teachers of the year be asked to talk about the inspiration of their work.

I'm suggesting that this nation is united by its symbols, and that the President of the U.S. should use his "bully" pulpit to pay tribute to our teachers who are the unsung heroes of the nation.

I also would like to see the next President announce a national crusade to recruit future teachers for our classrooms. And to inspire young people to be of "service" to the nation.

Frankly, during our study of _____ education, I became convinced that we have not just a school problem, but a youth problem in this nation. Too many of today's young people feel

unwanted
unneded and
unconnected to the larger world.

And many of today's teenagers have little sense of purpose--and remain socially and emotionally unattached.

What's especially disturbing is that this sense of alienation is found within the school itself.

- There is in many of our larger schools a feeling of anonymity among students.
- Teenagers in these schools lose their identity at the very time a sense of belonging is needed most.
- And many drop out of school because no one noticed that they had, in fact, dropped in.

Frankly, if I had just one wish for school reform,

- I'd like to see every high school in the country broken up into units of no more than 400 students each.
- I'd like to see old schools boarded up or redesigned.
- I'd also like to see every student assigned to a small group of no more than 25 students each--with a teacher as their mentor.
- And I'd like to see students meet with their small group--for 45 minutes--at the beginning of each way

- to talk about their problems
- to address assignments
- and to be inspired too.

I'm suggesting that we need to overcome the _____ of the school to help students feel that they're connected to someone who cares deeply, about who they are and what they might become.

But above all, I'd like to see young people in this nation inspired by a larger vision.

A quarter century ago President John Kennedy challenged a generation of young America to join the Peace Corps to make a contribution overseas.

Why not inspire this generation to serve in the nation's classrooms more at home.

Martin Luther King said

"everyone can be great, everyone can serve."

And I'm convinced the young people in this nation are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

V. OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

This leads me to one final urgent obligation.

To achieve excellence in education we must effectively serve all students not just the most advantaged.

The harsh truth is that with all of our talk about school renewal there is still a great gap between the rhetoric and results.

And many of the schools that need the "most" help get the "least."

In Philadelphia, the drop-out rate is still 38 percent.

In Boston, it's 43 percent.

Recently, over half the seniors failed to graduate in Chicago's schools--and among those who did only one-third were reading at the twelfth grade level.

And last year, in the Cleveland public schools, there was not a single semi-finalist in the National Merit Scholarship Competition. And there were more than 15,000 Scholarship winners nationwide!

In most cities, an "emergency" is declared if we have a flood, or a health epidemic or a garbage strike.

In most cities, mayors lose their jobs, if the snow is not removed.

And yet, we go on, year after year, accepting the tragic failure of millions of our children.

I'm convinced that unless we deepen our commitment to save our _____, this nation will be economically and socially imperiled.

There are, of course, no easy answers. We're trying to overhaul an enormously complicated system. But frankly I believe these schools can and will improve--and this morning I'd like to propose a six-point plan for renewal.

I am suggesting that what America needs today is a national crusade for schools with a plan as compelling as John Kennedy's commitment to land an astronaut on the moon a quarter century ago. I heard Kennedy make that statement, and, at the time, I thought it was an audacious proposition.

Yet let the record show that Neil Armstrong sent his spine-tingling message back to earth, "The Eagle has landed."

What would happen if the next President of the United States, in his very first State of the Union message, would announce as a national goal that

all children who enroll in school in the fall of 1989, would, by the time they graduate in the year 2000, be educationally well prepared?

Here then is my conclusion.

During the past 5 years we've had one of the most significant and most sustained crusades for school renewal in our history.

But for excellence to be achieved we must give more recognition, more encouragement to the teachers.

We must give more motivation and more purposefulness for our children and above all, we must commit ourselves to serve all students, not just the most advantaged.

John Gardner said on one occasion that

A nation is never finished. You can't build it and leave it standing as the Pharaohs did the pyramids. It has to be recreated for each new generation.

And I'm convinced the most urgent task this generation now confronts is the rebuilding of the nation's schools.

Again, I salute the achievements of this outstanding association and I thank you very much for inviting me to be with you today.