

MIAMIGRAD, 6/26/89, SPC,ELB/dmo, SP

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Remarks by
Ernest L. Boyer
President

President, Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching

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First I wish to congratulate the class of 1989. I've been advised it is the most distinguished class in the history of the University of Miami. I also wish to congratulate the parents and the grandparents and spouses assembled here today. I congratulate you for your support, for the money that you've given, and I share with you the urgent hope that the graduates will now go out and get a job.

For over 300 Years, America has had a love affair with education. George Washington said knowledge is the surest basis of public happiness. Thomas Jefferson drew a plan for universal public education in Virginia. John Jay declared that knowledge is the soul of the republic. And during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the historic Land Grant Act, which launched colleges from Maine to California.

We're in love with education, but there is a darker side to all of this. As Americans who've always had a love affair with education, we have, at the same time, been enormously ambivalent about teachers. Dan Lortie of the University of Chicago captured this ambivalence when he wrote, "Teaching in this country is at once both honored and disdained. It's praised as dedicated service and it's lampooned as easy work." Our real regard for teachers, Lortie said, has never matched our professed regard.

Several years ago, I read a fascinating story about a late 19th century Nebraska school that captured colorfully our lack of real regard for teachers. The writer said that one hundred years ago at this little one room school house on the 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 then he said when the third teacher had soundly thrashed one boy and had also thrashed the father of another--parents need chastising too--the reign of terror ended. Still the writer said, and this is the punch line of this story, many students at that Nebraska school still considered the teacher public enemy number one.

Well 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 our churches and our communities have not been able to accomplish. And when they fall short anywhere along that line, we condemn them for not meeting our idealized expectations.

During our study of the American high school at the Carnegie Foundation, it became quite clear to me that the basic problem is not salaries. It's not merit pay. The basic problem most teachers confront are poor working conditions with too many students, too much paper work and too many mindless interruptions.

I am convinced that the public address system is a symbol of all that's gone wrong in public education. On one occasion, I was in a classroom in a public school where the P.A. system belched out its interruptions on three separate occasions in a single hour. While I'm inclined to be peace-loving, I can tell you that if the teacher would have said, "I've have enough," I'd have joined the march to the central office and would have been delighted to watch the culprit twist slowly in the wind. When I

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was talking to a group of teachers about two years ago about the way the public address system comes on without warning, a teacher came to me at the very end and said, "Well that's not true at my school. At my school they go 'phftttt, phftttt' [blows into the microphone] before they make the announcements." Every cloud has a silver lining.

The simple truth is this, and this is the issue I want to underscore this morning: If we want better schooling in this nation, we do not need more rules and regulations. We need more teacher recognition. When I was United States Commissioner of Education, I called together twenty high school students from around the country. We spent all day talking about the schooling that they'd had. Near the end, I asked them, "How many of you have ever had a teacher whose genuinely changed your life?" Every hand was raised. Then I said, "How many of you had ever thanked a teacher?" And not one hand went up. One student said rather sheepishly, "Well you see, it's just not the thing to do." Hum, it's not cool. Students have been with teachers everyday, and yet not once, even after an exciting session, did they stop to say, "Thank you very much." I said, "How many of you can keep walking into a classroom day-after-day, give the best that you had, be stared at as if you are a brontosaurus warmed over, and never hear a word of thanks." I said, "That's asking too much, so promise me one thing. Before you graduate, take a teacher to lunch, instead of having one for lunch." They all agreed they would.

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There are poor teachers to be sure, and I'm convinced that the teaching profession in this country must more vigorously police itself. I've sometimes thought that an incompetent teacher is worse than an incompetent surgeon, because surgeons can out up only one person at a time. But it's also true that no profession is made healthy by focusing only on what's bad. Perhaps it's here that we can learn something from the Japanese. In Japan the term sansei--teacher--is a title of great honor. Teachers are revered. They're the heros of the culture. And I believe that if we would take the term--sansei--in Japan and compare it to the comment--"just a teacher"--in the United States, we may come closer to identifying the differences in the performances of education than any single variable I know.

Several years ago, I couldn't sleep and instead of counting sheep, I counted all the teachers I'd had. I remembered rather vividly about 15 or more and there were a few nightmares in the bunch. But by-and-large it was a pleasant reverie and then I remembered the outstanding teachers.

I thought first about Miss Rice, my first grade teacher, who I really thought was angelic. On the afternoon she ascended into heaven and the next morning came down to teach the class. On the first day of school, Miss Rice recognized 28 frightened children and she said, "Good morning class, today we learn to read." We spent all day on four words: I go to school. Kind of meat and potatoes, but it seemed to work. We sang them, we traced them, and God forgive her we even prayed them. She had this little prayer, "Thank You God, I go to school." Incidentally on that

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delicate subject, I heard recently that the one prayer in school that's acceptable to all faiths, "Dear God. don't let her call on me today." I ran home that night, ten-feet tall, and I said proudly to my mother, "Today I learned to read." Well I hadn't learned to decode, but Miss Rice taught me something much more fundamental. She taught me that language is the center piece of learning. I find mystical that 50 years later when I tried to write a book on high school and I tried to write a book on college, I had a chapter right up front entitled "The Centrality of Language." Let the record show it was the influence of an unheralded first grade teacher at Fairview Avenue Elementary School, Dayton, Ohio, that shaped my life and made it possible for me to go on learning. First grade teachers should be heros in the culture, and I am convinced that if this nation would give as much credit and recognition to first grade teachers as we do to full professors, that one act alone could perhaps revitalize the nation's schools.

I remember Mr. Whitlinger, our high school history teacher, who asked to see me after class. Well, I had cardiac arrest and sweaty palms--I mean teachers don't just want to see you to pass the time-of-day. But this was absolutely consequential. He said, "Ernest, you are doing very well in history. You keep this up, and you just might be a student." That was the highest academic accolade I'd received. I walked home that night again thinking, "You mean, I'm not a football player, I'm not a cowboy, I'm something called a student."

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I suggest that everyone in the audience today, from little children to grandparents, could name at least one teacher who forever changed your life. And if I were to invite you to the platform for just 30 seconds, which teacher would you name?

But let me say in the end here that to achieve excellence in the nation's schools, we need more than thank yous to our teacher, as important as that may be. We need national leadership as well, since without good schools I believe the future of this nation is imperiled. I believe it's a national disgrace that still about one out of every four Young people in this nation drops out of school, economically and civically unprepared. Under these conditions, the vitality of his nation cannot endure.

Specifically I'd like to see Mr. Bush, as the education president, call a summit meeting of the governors from all 50 states and declare that by the Year 2000 this nation will have the best education system in the world--just like John Kennedy declared that within a decade we'd have a man walking on the Moon. I'd also recommend that the president invite the teachers of the year from all 50 states to a dinner in the East Room of the White House in order to honor the unsung heros of the nation. We also need summer fellowships for teachers in all 50 states so that they could be intellectually renewed. It's absolutely nonsense to think that school teachers could go on year after year and not be revitalized in their profession. And finally, let's have full tuition scholarships for the nation's top high school graduates who agree to teach at least three years

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in our least advantaged schools. Through the Peace Corps, we send our brightest and the best to assignments overseas. Why not send our most gifted students to classrooms in our troubled cities here at home? Martin Luther King on one occasion said that everyone can be great because everyone can serve. I'm convinced that the young people of this nation are ready to be inspired by a larger vision. What then does all of this have to do with the class of 1989? It means that this morning, on this memorable occasion, we should be honoring not just the graduates who will be handed a diploma. Although, we surely do. We also should be honoring the first grade teachers and all elementary school teachers, the high school instructors, and the university professors, who have made possible this day of celebration, because this is best devoted to the unheralded members of the culture. May I say to the graduates this morning, before you graduate, it would be appropriate for you to pause long enough to say "thank you" to a teacher.

John Gardner said on one occasion that a nation is never finished. You can't build it and leave it standing like pharaohs did the pyramids. It has to be recreated with each new generation. And I'm convinced that the most urgent task confronting our generation is to rebuild the nation's schools and to give more dignity and more status to the sacred act of teaching.

God bless you, may all of your days be filled with happiness and joy. And I think it would be most appropriate if you would call your mother at least once a week.