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DRAFT 5/30/89 RBL

SCHOOL REFORM:
THE UNFINISHED AGENDA

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Hilton Hotel Corporation
38th Annual Public Relations Seminar

Phoenix, Arizona

May 19, 1989

INTRODUCTION

It's been six years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the nation is at risk.

And since that hyperbole hit the headlines America has been engaged in the most sustained drive for school renewal in its history.

During this period academic standards have been raised, testing has increased, teacher salaries have gone up at twice the inflation rate. And this morning, in this exotic setting, I propose two cheers for the progress that we've made.

But with all of our achievements I see a dark lining to the silver cloud.

And today -- at this overview on education -- I'd like to focus briefly on priorities for school excellence that are absolutely crucial.

I . EARLY YEARS

First, I'm convinced that between now and the year 2000 we must focus, increasingly, on the early years of schooling. Since it's here that the "battle" for excellence in education will be won or lost. Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that childhood is for learning.

Several years ago a friend of mine wrote a marvelous little essay entitled: All That I Really Needed to know I learned in Kindergarten. He's since written a book that's now on the best seller list of The New York Times.

The writer said that in kindergarten he learned such eternal verities as: don't hit people, put things back where you found them, cookies and milk are good for you, take a nap every afternoon, and when you go out into the world it's best to hold hands and stick together.

It's in the early years when curiosity abounds and this is the time when children are empowered in the use of words.

Now that I'm a Grandpa, and can observe this process unencumbered by dirty diapers, and burpings late at night, I'm absolutely awed by the capacity of little children to discover both the majesty as well as the weaponry of words.

When I was a little boy we used to say: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

What nonsense! I'd usually say this with tears running down my cheeks, thinking all the time, "For goodness sakes, hit me with a stick but stop those words!"

That penetrated so deeply and hurt so long. I'm suggesting that it's through the use of symbols that we are socially and academically empowered, and that the top priority must be to help all children become proficient in the written and the spoken word.

How then should we proceed?

First, little children if they are educationally to succeed need good nutrition.

A recent report by the Harvard School of Public Health revealed that a child, who is undernourished, will have a lower IQ, shorter attention span, and get lower grades in school.

And, yet, in the United States today, nearly one out of every four children under six years of age is officially "classified" as poor. They are undernourished and disadvantaged. And if we continue to neglect the crisis of poor children in this country the future of the nation is impaired.

Winston Churchill, who had a way with words, said on one occasion that there is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into little babies.

And I'm convinced that better schooling in the United States starts with confronting poverty and providing better nutrition for our children. The two are inextricably interlocked.

I'm also convinced that between now and the year 2000 we must have preschool programs for every disadvantaged child to help them overcome, not just poor nutrition, but also linguistic deprivation.

Frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that twenty years after the Head Start program was authorized by Congress to help disadvantaged three and four years olds, only 20 percent of the eligible children are being served.

There's a third step that we should take to strengthen early education.

I propose that we reorganize the first years of formal education into a single unit called "The Basic School."

The Basic School, which would combine kindergarten through grade four, would give top priority to language and there would be no class with more than fifteen students each.

It's silly to suggest that class size doesn't matter since it's in the first years of formal education that the basic foundation must be laid.

And, I'm convinced that we should give as much status to first grade teachers as we do full professors.

I'm suggesting that the early years must be given top priority in education. And if all students by grade four cannot write with clarity, cannot read with comprehension, and cannot effectively speak and listen, then we should close the school doors and start again.

In the Basic School I'd like also to see a core curriculum that would introduce young children, in a dramatic way, to those experiences that we all share and make us truly human.

The heart of this curriculum would be a study of the human body. Children would be introduced to the miracle of birth, the sacredness of birth and even be asked to reflect on death.

Such a course would introduce children to the nature of our existence and might reduce the need for sex education and drug education courses later on when we belatedly try to deal with pathologies when it's way too late.

Other human commonalities in the core curriculum would include:

- 1) our use of symbols;
- 2) our membership in honor societies -- from family to school to the nation;
- 3) our sense of time -- the capacity to recall the past and anticipate the future;
- 4) our connection to the natural world -- in which Lewis Thomas reminds us -- "We're all embeded as working parts;"
- 5) our response to the nineties;
- 6) and, of course, the need to give meaning to our lives -- to live by values and beliefs.

The seven themes, the Human Commonalities, I call them, are shared by all people on the Planet. They form the core of our existence and provide, I believe, a useful framework by which the Basic School curriculum might be shaped.

Over forty years ago Mark Van Doren wrote that, "The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity." Van Doren concludes by saying that, "The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected . . . has begun the life of learning."

This must be the goal of education in the year 2000 and beyond.

II . TEACHERS

This brings me to priority number two.

In the end, excellence in education means excellence in teaching. And to achieve quality in the year 2000 we must give more authority to the local sector and more status to the teacher.

Last year at the Carnegie Foundation, we surveyed 22,000 teachers from coast to coast and we discovered that: Nearly one-third have no role in "shaping" the curriculum they are asked to teach. Over 50 percent do not participate in planning their own in-service policies at their school -- 50 percent said this is lower than five years ago.

And then we wonder why our most gifted students do not go into teaching!

During our study of the American High School, it became quite clear that the basic problem is not salaries, it's not merit pay. The basic problem most teachers now confront is poor working conditions with too many students, too much paperwork and too many mindless interruptions.

And I'm convinced that the PA system is a symbol of all that's gone wrong in public education. In one classroom without warning, the PA interrupted five separate time.

The simple truth is, if we want better schooling in this nation,

we don't need more rules and regulations; we need more teacher recognition.

I'm suggesting that to achieve excellence -- we don't need more rules and regulations -- we need more teacher recognition. And perhaps it's here that we can borrow something from the Japanese. In Japan, parents are intensely supportive of the schools, and in that culture the term sensei--teacher--is a title of great honor. While here in the United States we say, "He's just a teacher!"

Speaking of teacher recognition, I suggest that Mr. Bush -- who wants to be the Education President -- invite the "teachers of the year" from all 50 states to a dinner in the East Room of the White House. It's a symbolic act, but we live by symbols.

And to celebrate teaching in the White House would send a powerful signal to the nation; it would say that teachers are the unsung heros of the culture.

And I'd also like to see a national crusade to recruit outstanding students into teaching, beginning with young people still in junior high. And I'd like to see full tuition scholarships for students who agree to teach at least three years in our most disadvantaged schools.

Twenty years ago, John Kennedy inspired the nation's youth to join the Peace Corps to serve the needy overseas. Why not inspire the brightest and the best to serve in inner city schools and in rural districts here at home?

Martin Luther King declared on one occasion that, "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." And I'm convinced that the young people of this nation are more than ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

Simply stated: If we want better schools, we must attract and hold outstanding students into teaching. Since all of us are where we are today because of an inspired teacher.

III. STUDENTS

This brings me to the students. And what I'm about to say may have more to do with families than with schools.

During our study of secondary schools, I became convinced that we have not just a school problem but a youth problem in the nation. Too many of today's young people feel unwanted, unneeded, and unconnected to the larger world.

In a recent Carnegie survey we found that 50 percent of today's eighth graders go home, after school, to an empty house; 40 percent say they wish they could spend more time with their mothers and their fathers; about one-third say they do not sit down together as a family to eat any meal, and many say they are often lonely. Which leads me to conclude that the family is a far more imperiled institution than the school.

I'm especially concerned about the increased intergenerational isolation in our culture. Today we are separating the young and old; babies are in nurseries, toddlers in day care, children are in school, parents in the workplace, and older people are in retirement villages, all alone.

What's especially disturbing is that this sense of alienation is often found within the school itself. There is, in many schools, a feeling of anonymity among the students. Teenagers move facelessly from class to class, and have no serious interaction with adults. They lose their identity at the very time a sense of belonging is needed most. And many drop out 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 junior and senior high school broken up into units of no more than 400 students each. I'd also like to see every student assigned to a small "support" group of no more than twenty-five. And I'd like to see these small groups meet together with a mentor at the beginning of each day, to talk about their problems, to review assignments, and to be inspired, too.

Above all, I'd like to see all young people feel needed and have a sense of worth.

In our report on High School, we proposed a new Carnegie unit--a community service term for all students. The goal would be to help all young people become responsibly engaged in youth clubs, in retirement villages, or in helping to tutor other kids at school, and begin to see a connection between what they learn and how they live.

I'm suggesting that, to achieve better education, we must have better motivation among students. And parents must be more actively involved in the education of their children.

IV. ASSESSMENT

Finally, just one word about assessment.

We have 83,000 schools and 16,000 districts in this country. And we must keep the action at the local level. At the same time, if the nation is at risk, the nation must respond.

And there is an urgent need to develop in this country more effective ways to measure the impact of school reform.

The President has a Council of Economic Advisors to report periodically on the nation's fiscal health. Perhaps we need a National Council on Education Trends to monitor the states and to advise the the President and the nation on our education's health to develop criteria that go beyond the crude "wall charts" the Secretary of Education is now using.

Regardless of the strategy we employ -- whether it's a National Council -- or some other mechanism for assessment, I'm convinced, if school reform is to succeed accountability is absolutely crucial. The citizens of this country must be given reliable evidence that the 185 billion dollars we invest annually in public education is paying off.

CONCLUSION

Here then is my conclusion.

As we move toward the year 2000 we must give top priority to early education with emphasis on language. We must give empowerment to the teacher, we must give a sense of purpose to the students and, in the end, we must evaluate effectively the results.

John Gardner said on once occasion that, "A nation is never finished. You can't build it and leave it standing as the Pharoahs did the pyramids. It has to be recreated for each new generation."

And, I'm convinced, the most urgent task our generation now confronts is the rebuilding of the nation's schools and restoring the dignity of children.