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**SCHOOL REFORM:
A NATIONAL STRATEGY**

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INTRODUCTION

In his first report card on the nation's schools, Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos concluded that student performance is now "stagnant," a sobering indictment. The Secretary confessed that, "This situation scares me and I hope it scares you, too." And he then offered this apocalyptic view: "We must do better or perish as the nation we know today."

It's been six years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared "The nation is at risk," and since that warning hit the headlines, America has been engaged in the most sustained drive for school renewal in its history. Academic standards have been raised, teachers' salaries have gone up, and business leaders have become strong advocates of public education.

But with all of our achievements, there still remains a disturbing gap between rhetoric and results. Many of our students receive a first-class education. But the majority go to schools that range from good to mediocre, and for large numbers of our young people, schooling is a failure.

What's gone wrong? Why is school performance so uneven?

The problem is that our efforts have been more fragmented than coherent. Since 1983, we've had a flood of reports on education, but no comprehensive plan. A variety of model schools has been introduced, but it's a reform strategy best described as "excellence by exception." If school reform has begun to stall, as Secretary Cavazos now concludes, it's not from lack of effort, but from lack of overall direction.

This piecemeal approach is not surprising. It dates back to 1647 when the Massachusetts Bay Colony required every town or village to hire a schoolmaster to teach its own children to read and write. From the very first, our schools have been *locally* controlled, *locally* supported, and accountable only to the parents. This "unsystematic" system of public education—some might even say "chaotic"—seemed to work, and, for years, Americans have had great confidence in their schools.

Now, the pendulum has shifted. Today, less than half the support for public education comes from local districts. Voter participation in school elections is low, and, with increased mobility, neighborhoods less stable. America's traditional grass-roots approach to public education has weakened.

Further, Americans are troubled that millions of students are economically and civically ill-prepared. We're shocked that high school graduates cannot confidently read and write, or accurately compute. We're deeply worried that the United States is losing the high-tech race.

"Modern societies," John Gardner said, "run on talent," and there's a growing conviction that the nation's 83,000 schools, 16,000 districts, and 50 states cannot, without coordination, meet the challenge.

Indeed, Americans today seem less concerned about local control than about national results—convinced that if the nation is at risk, the nation must respond.

- Consider that, just two years ago, a *national* board for teacher certification was created.
- Consider that the U.S. Department of Education now presents, annually, a *national* report card on school performance.
- Consider that former Secretary of Education William Bennett's James Madison High School contained a proposed *national* curriculum.
- Consider, especially, that we've just elected, to the highest office in the land, a candidate who pledged to be the "Education President"—suggesting *national* leadership in education.

This is an historic moment. America is moving, in fits and starts, toward a national view of education, but how can we achieve more coherence without sacrificing vitality at the local level? It's a new challenge, something we've never seriously faced before, and our response surely will shape education in this country for years to come.

How do we proceed?

Clearly, we don't need a federal ministry of education to force all schools into a bureaucratic lockstep. We don't need yet one more critical report. We don't need more "patch work" and "tinkering"—as Secretary Cavazos recently reminded us. We *know* what works.

What we *do* need is a *national* agenda for school reform. We need a strategy that sustains state and local leadership, while giving coherence to the effort, overall. And I'd like to focus on five priorities that are crucial if our push for excellence is to be, not just symbolic, but systemic.

I. GOALS

First, a national strategy for school reform requires a larger vision, and the President himself must lead the way.

If a health epidemic were striking one-fourth of the children in this country, if snow were piling up on city streets, if we had heaps of garbage on the curbs, a national emergency would be declared. But when hundreds of thousands of students leave school, year-after-year, shockingly unprepared, the nation remains far too lethargic.

We need an urgent call to action. And this is where corporate America has a role to play. To paraphrase the TV commercial, "When the Fortune 500 speak out for better schools, politicians listen."

Last fall, I suggested that the next President call a summit meeting of the governors from all fifty states, declaring that this nation is committed to provide, for every student, a solid vocational, civic, and moral education. The goal must be quality for all.

I also suggested that the next President, as a national objective, pledge that by the year 2000—when today's first graders are high school seniors—America will have the best education system in the world.

Over forty years ago, Secretary of State George C. Marshall, in an historic address at Harvard University, announced a bold recovery plan to lift Europe out of the ashes of a devastating war. This was an audacious proposition, wildly optimistic. But let the record show that, within four short years, the European community was miraculously reborn. The Marshall Plan—with a \$12 billion assist from the United States—delivered dramatically on its promise.

Dreams can be fulfilled only when they've been defined. As a national strategy, let's commit ourselves to rebuild, within a decade, the nation's schools, just as the Marshall Plan helped rebuild a devastated world.

II. EQUALITY

This leads to priority number two. To rebuild the schools, America must focus, with special urgency, on students who are least advantaged.

To talk about school reform while ignoring poor children is dangerously to misdiagnose the problem. The Harvard School of Public Health recently reported that a child who is nutritionally deficient will have a lower IQ, shorter attention span, and get lower grades in school. Yet, in the United States today, nearly one out of every four school-age children is classified as poor. They're neglected, undernourished. They lack even the most basic care required to have a healthy start, and to disregard the tragedy of poor children is to imperil the future of the nation.

Poverty and schooling are inextricably connected, and it's here that the federal government's obligation is most explicit. Winston Churchill observed that there is no finer investment for any community than "putting milk into babies," and I propose that the federal nutrition program for low-income mothers and babies be fully funded, since better schooling starts with little children.

During the decade of the nineties, let's also incrementally increase support for Head Start, with full funding by the year 2000. This effective program provides preschool education for three- and four-year-old disadvantaged children, and it's a disgrace that twenty years after Head Start was authorized by Congress, only 20 percent of the eligible children are being served.

To give *all* children a better start, let's also reorganize the first years of formal education—that's kindergarten through grade four—into a single unit called "The Basic School." This school would give top priority to language and have no class with more than 15 students each. Each child would get personal attention and rigid grade levels would be blurred.

Also, in the Basic School, all disadvantaged children would get special help in reading and mathematics, with support from the federal Chapter One program, and the school day would be lengthened for afternoon enrichment. The goal is to have every child, by grade four, write with clarity, read with comprehension, compute with accuracy, and effectively speak and listen. If these skills are not well formed, it will be impossible fully to compensate for the failure later on.

Finally, serving the least advantaged means urging states to revise the formulas by which schools are funded. In my home state of New Jersey, the Englewood Cliffs School District spends \$9,200 for every pupil, while in East Orange, just 15 miles down the road—where the needs of children are so great, where the ravages of poverty are so apparent—the district spends just \$4,500 for each student. Of course, money is not the *only* answer. But does anyone really believe that East Orange students deserve only half as much support as students in the more affluent suburbs?

Excellence and equality cannot be divided, and as a national strategy, we must focus on the disadvantaged. We must finance, more fairly, the public schools and give priority to early education, since it's here that the battle for excellence will be won or lost.

III. TEACHERS

Third, this nation must give more dignity and more status to its teachers.

Washington Irving, in his popular nineteenth century story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," describes Ichabod Crane as a man who was "Built like a scarecrow. A gangling, pinheaded, flat-topped oaf. But what would anyone expect? He was *just a teacher.*"

It's a paradox. Americans have always had a love affair with education, but we've been enormously ambivalent about teachers. Perhaps it's here that we can borrow something from the Japanese. In Japan, parents are intensely supportive of the schools. In that culture, the term *sensei*, teacher, is a title of great honor.

Last year, at the Carnegie Foundation, we surveyed 22,000 teachers, and I was shocked to discover that 50 percent said that morale in the profession is lower than it was five years ago; only 22 percent said it's gotten better.

We also found that more than 20 percent of today's teachers do *not* help choose textbooks and instructional materials. Over 50 percent do *not* participate in planning their own in-service education, and 70 percent are *not* asked to help shape retention policies at their school. In a word, they're powerless. And then we wonder why our most gifted students do not go into teaching!

There *are* poor teachers. And for the reform movement to succeed, the teaching profession must more vigorously police itself. We simply cannot tolerate mediocrity in the classroom.

But no profession is made healthy by focusing only on what's bad and, today, we need a national strategy to strengthen teaching, one that focuses on the three R's of *recognition, recruitment, and renewal.*

- First, we need a 1989 version of President Dwight Eisenhower's National Defense Education Act—a program of teacher fellowships and summer institutes in every region of the country, which, incidentally, corporations could help fund.
- Second, we need a national campaign to recruit outstanding students into teaching, beginning with those in junior high. Colleges and universities should organize this crusade, focusing especially on black and Hispanic students.

- Third, we need, in every state, a full-tuition scholarship program for top students who agree to teach at least three years in disadvantaged schools. A quarter century 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?

Finally, let's have teacher recognition programs in every state, and nationally, as well. Specifically, I suggest that President Bush, building on his splendid teacher award program, invite the "teachers of the year" from all 50 states to a dinner in the East Room of the White House, with the event televised, prime time. It's a symbolic act, but we live by symbols, and a White House dinner would affirm that classroom teachers are the unsung heroes of the nation.

IV. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Fourth, in shaping a national strategy for education, school-based management is crucial.

Thus far, over forty states have drafted tough new regulations. But all too often these mandates focus on bureaucratic procedures rather than on the outcomes of education, forcing teachers and principals to spend more time with paperwork, and less time with their students.

State officials should set goals, provide equitable support, and hold every school accountable for its performance. Here the leadership of governors is crucial. But within this framework, principals and teachers should be given full authority to choose textbooks, shape curriculum, hire teachers, organize the school day, and have discretionary funds to introduce bold innovations.

In other words, we must create, in the nation's 83,000 schools, what industry likes to call "circles of quality control," with teachers and principals creatively building schools that meet high academic standards and meet the needs of students, too.

In a recent Carnegie survey, we found that half the students in eighth grade go home after school to an empty house; 40 percent wish they could spend more time with their mothers and fathers; about a third say their family never sits down together to eat a meal. And many are often lonely.

We also found this sense of loneliness within the school itself, with teen-agers often moving anonymously from class to class, lacking contact with adults, and dropping 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 break up every junior and senior high school into units of no more than 400 students each. I'd locate these schools as satellite campuses, in shopping malls, in corporate buildings, and at worksites, too. In downtown Atlanta, for example, there's a high school in Rich's Department Store, a place where several hundred students go to study, while mingling with adults.

At these satellite campuses, every student should be assigned to a small "support group" of no more than 25 students each, meeting with a mentor at the beginning of each day to talk about problems, review academic progress, and receive emotional support.

Above all, I'd like to see all students feel needed and have a sense of worth. In our report, *High School*, we proposed a new "Carnegie unit" of high school credit—a community service term to help teen-agers become responsibly engaged in youth clubs, in retirement villages, and in tutoring other kids at school, discovering a connection between what they learn and how they live.

I'm suggesting that, as a national strategy, every state define its goals, and then give freedom to the schools, focusing on outcomes, not procedures. Such a restructuring will breathe new life into a suffocating system.

V. ACCOUNTABILITY

Finally, we simply must clarify the content of education and find better ways to measure the results.

It's ironic that after six years of unprecedented school reform, we still can't agree on what it means to be an educated person. Some districts and some states have made great progress in defining goals. But in most schools, the K through 12 curriculum is still a Rube Goldberg arrangement that lacks both quality and coherence.

During the past six years, we've added more Carnegie units, but we've failed to ask "What's behind the labels?" We say "science," but *what* science should be studied? History, yes. But *which* history? We require English, but "English" can mean anything from Shakespeare to basic grammar.

As a national strategy, I propose that master teachers and research scholars come together—in a kind of peacetime Manhattan Project—to design, for the twenty-first century, a curriculum that focuses, not just on knowledge acquisition, but on integration, too. If this nation can invest billions in new weapons systems, why can't we invest in a new curriculum for the nation's schools? Specifically, let's have an endowment for this project, supported by both public and private funds.

It's ironic, too, that we still can't agree on how to evaluate school performance, and without reliable yardsticks, no one seems to know for sure if our \$180 billion annual investment in public education is paying off. When Secretary Cavazos recently presented his report card on school performance—using dropout rates, SAT scores and the like—he explained that these yardsticks may not be adequate, but they're all we have. It's like an industry that's unclear about its product, and thus is hopelessly confused about quality control.

The President has a Council of Economic Advisors to keep track of the nation's fiscal health, but we don't have an authoritative way to monitor, adequately, the nation's education health. Perhaps the time has come to establish a National Council on Education Trends. Such a nongovernmental panel—comprised of distinguished citizens from all sectors—could develop a framework by which school performance, state-by-state, could be appropriately assessed.

This is an enormously difficult assignment that may take several years. But careful assessment of education is crucial, and here are some of the questions Americans should be asking:

- Does each state have clearly defined goals for education? Are schools held accountable for results?
- Is school financing adequate? Are states reducing the inequity from one district to another?
- What about the dropout rate? Is it going down, especially among black and Hispanic populations?
- Do teachers feel good about their work? Are salaries adequate and are working conditions getting better?

What about student performance?

- Can all students read with comprehension, write with clarity, and accurately compute?
- Have all students learned about the world around them? Do they know about their own heritage, other cultures, and have they discovered the interconnected nature of our world?
- Can students think critically and integrate ideas?
- Do they know the joy of reading, and have the motivation for lifelong learning?
- Are the nonverbal abilities of students—including the aesthetic—being shaped in school?
- Is education increasing the students' self-esteem and helping them become tolerant of others?
- Are students, through community service projects, learning to become responsibly engaged?
- After graduation, how do students perform in college and at the workplace? Are we, in short, preparing our students to be better workers, better citizens, and better people, too?

James Agee wrote that "in every child who is born, under no matter what circumstance . . . the potentiality of the human race is born again." As part of the national strategy, let's develop, during the decade of the nineties, a more coherent curriculum for our schools and a more precise, more humane evaluation of our students.

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion. If this nation is to achieve excellence in education, a national strategy is required. This means:

- An urgent call to action,
- A commitment to the disadvantaged,
- A crusade to strengthen teaching,
- State standards, with leadership at the local school,
- A quality curriculum, and
- An effective way to monitor results.

John Gardner said, "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." I'm convinced that the most urgent task our generation now confronts is a crusade to rebuild the nation's schools.