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**THE BASIC SCHOOL**

**Remarks by  
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the Advancement of Teaching**

**COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT  
MANHATTAN, KANSAS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**I'm deeply honored to join you at the Effective School Conference of the Council for Public School Improvement here in Manhattan.**

**Those of you assembled in this room are the "real experts" on school reform.**

- **You fight for excellence every single day.**
- **You keep the faith when others are skeptical—even hostile.**

**And I must tell you that I have unrestrained admiration**

- **for your dedicated service to the nation's children,**
- **often under difficult conditions.**

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**This morning I have been asked to talk about early education, and I would like to make my position absolutely clear—**

- **The Early Years are transcendentally the most important.**
- **And if we do not focus on the needs of little children, especially those who are least advantaged, the future of both schooling and the nation are imperiled.**

**Last January President Bush in his State of the Union message set forth**

- **for the first time in our history**
- **six specific goals for all the nation's schools.**

**And one month later the governors**

- **from all 50 states**
- **endorsed unanimously these proposals.**

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**But what I found most compelling was the first goal in which the president declared that by the year 2000**

- **Every child should come to school ready to learn.**

**This is an awesome vision, and for this to be accomplished,**

- **we must give top priority to students who are least advantaged.**

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**In the United States today,**

- **nearly one out of every four children under the age of six is officially classified as "poor."**
  
- **They are undernourished—hugely disadvantaged.**
  
- **And if we continue to neglect the crisis of the poor children in this country—**
  - **it seems quite clear that both our schools**
  - **and the future of the nation will be imperiled!**

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**A recent report by the Harvard School of Public Health revealed that a child who is undernourished will have—**

- **a lower I.Q.**
- **shorter attention span**
- **and get lower grades in school.**

**And it's clear that if all children are to come to school prepared to learn, we must**

- **provide better nourishment,**
- **even prenatally,**

**for our children**

**Since good nutrition and good schooling are inextricably interlocked.**

**But getting every child ready to learn also means parent education,**

- **since children begin language development long before they go to school**
- **and even before birth itself.**

**In Minnesota's Family Education Program, for example,**

- **Parents with children—ages birth to 3 receive monthly instruction.**
- **A parent educator makes home visits about once a month.**

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**I'm also convinced that before we reach the year 2000**

- **we must have preschool education for every disadvantaged child**
- **to help them overcome**
  - **not just poor nutrition**
  - **but linguistic deprivation, too.**

**Frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that**

- **two decades after the federal Head Start program was authorized by Congress to help 3 and 4 year olds who are educationally at risk**
- **only 20 percent of the eligible children are being served.**

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**President Bush—at the Charlottesville Summit—put the challenge this way:**

- **In the final analysis, he said, improving schools means "bringing hope to those who need it most."**
- **"Let no child in America," the President declared, "be forsaken or forgotten."**

**And fulfilling this inspired vision means universal preschool education.**

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**There's a third step that we should take to strengthen early education—and it is the central theme of my remarks today.**

**Several years ago—at the National Press Club—I suggested that we reorganize the first years of formal education into a "single unit" called The Basic School.**

**The Basic School**

- **would give top priority to language and to computation**
  - **and children, from the very first, would be**
    - **reading,**
    - **writing,**
    - **listening to stories,**
    - **talking about words,**
- in a climate the foreign language people like to call "the Saturation Method."**

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**In the Basic School there'd be no class with more than 15 students each.**

**Frankly, it is ludicrous to say that class size doesn't matter, especially for little children who need one-on-one time. There is abundant evidence that when class size is reduced learning of children will increase.**

**Teachers would be well paid.**

- **And perhaps if we would give as much status to first grade teachers in this country as we give to full professors,**
- **that one act alone could revitalize the nation's schools.**

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**The Basic School should also help all children become proficient in the arts.**

**Just recently I presented to Governor Kean the final report from the Task Force on Literacy in the Arts, a study mandated by the Legislature in the state.**

**In that respect we say that little children—even before they become fully fluent in the symbol system we call words—**

- **respond powerfully**
  - **to music**
  - **to dance**
  - **and to the visual arts.**

**And we urge that every school district in New Jersey give priority to the arts.**

- **which is a language all children—especially the handicapped and disadvantaged—find powerfully rewarding.**

**(Teach children who were deaf)**

**I'm suggesting that as a national priority we must focus first on**

- **programs of good nutrition for poor children**
- **and on early education.**

**And our goal must be that every child by grade 4 will be able to**

- **write with clarity,**
- **read with comprehension,**
- **communicate through the arts,**
- **and accurately compute.**

## **II. THE CALENDAR AND CLOCK**

**The Basic School that I propose would also bring a restructuring of the calendar and the clock.**

**As I look to the new century it seems quite clear that the school calendar and school clock must begin to change to reflect the changing work and family patterns of the nation.**

**My Grandfather Boyer was born in 1871.**

- **He lived one hundred years.**
- **And during the century of his life the world moved**
  - **from the horse-drawn plow**
  - **to John Glenn's lift-off into space.**

**One day I asked Grandpa what he thought about man walking on the moon, and he replied,**

- **Ernest, the moon was made to look at not to walk on.**
- **And I'm convinced that to his dying day Grandpa thought that "moon walking" was the fantasy of an unreliable grandson. Credibility can only be stretched so far!**

**When my Grandfather was 96, I asked about the schooling he had had—**

- **And he said he walked six miles each day.**
- **And went several months only in the winter—when he wasn't needed on the farm!**
- **(Incidentally, I've observed that the distance one walks to school is directly proportionate to one's age.)**

**When today's school calendar was set—almost a century ago—with 9 months of study and 3 months off—over 90 percent of all school-age children were—like Grandpa Boyer:**

- **living on a farm**
- **with their mothers and their fathers,**
- **working hard,**
- **coming home in the afternoon to help with chores—and taking summers off to tend the crops.**

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**In those days the school calendar mirrored the work and family pattern of the nation.**

- **But today—less than 3 percent of America's families live on farms.**
- **In most households both parents work—away from home.**
- **And about half the children now in first grade will live in one-parent families by the time they graduate from high school.**
- **And yet America's children still go to school only 180 days each year, while those in other industrialized countries attend school 240 days.**

**Frankly, with this imbalance, it will be almost impossible for the United States educationally and economically to compete.**

**I conclude it's time to reorganize the nation's schools into a year-round calendar--with periodic breaks to give teachers time to be intellectually renewed.**

- **Such a restructuring would serve**
  - **both the social and academic needs of children.**

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**As I look to the year 2000 I also believe we must consider lengthening the school day.**

**Last year—at The Carnegie Foundation—we surveyed one-thousand 5th and 8th graders from coast to coast and found that**

- **40 percent of today's students go home in the afternoon to an empty house.**

**And as this latch-key problem grows—what we need are afternoon "enrichment" programs**

- **in science**
- **in computers**
- **in music and athletics**

**to keep children learning instead of**

- **sitting in an empty house,**
- **or drifting on the streets.**

**A year or so ago on an ABC television special on "Illiteracy in America," an eleven-year-old boy in Harlem was interviewed, and he said that he practiced karate every night instead of doing homework, because "That's what we need to survive out in the streets."**

**I'm suggesting that**

- **if we do not have solid enrichment programs for poor children after school and in the summer to keep them learning instead of drifting,**
- **if we do not build better bridges between the parents and the school,**  
**I'm afraid the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in this country will continue to expand. And the nation's future will be threatened.**

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### **III. CURRICULUM**

**And this leads me to the central question of the curriculum in the Basic School.**

**I'm convinced that in building bridges to the future**

- **We must help students understand the complicated, interdependent world they will inherit.**

**And I worry that education is becoming more parochial at the very moment the human agenda is more global.**

**How should the new curriculum be structured?**

**Art Levine, A Quest for Common Learning.**

**Not on disciplines, human commonalities.  
Experiences shared by all people on the planet.**

**Themes around which curriculum might be so defined**

- **Birth, growth, and death**
- **Use of symbols**
- **Membership in groups and institutions**
- **Connections to nature**
- **Recall past—anticipate the future**
- **Respond to the aesthetic**
- **Search for meaning**

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**I'm convinced that by the year 2000 we need a curriculum that**

- **helps students gain perspective,**
- **with a vision that is not just national, but global.**

**Mark Van Doren**

**A student who can begin early in life to see things as connected has begun the life of learning.**

**At the same time, let's remember that paper and pencil tests can't measure such essentials as**

- **integrity**
- **loyalty**
- **responsible behavior**

**Characteristics that still must be assessed intuitively by insightful teachers in the classroom.**

#### **IV. ASSESSMENT**

**This leads me to the critical issue of how to measure, in this nation, school results.**

**At the Charlottesville Summit the president and governors for the first time in our history**

- **called for a national report card on performance.**

**And I'm convinced that**

- **between now and the year 2000 we must demonstrate to the public that this nation's 180 billion dollar investment in public education is paying off.**

**Frankly, I find it discouraging that 60 years after the Scholastic Aptitude Test was invented to measure the innate aptitude of students, the Secretary of Education puts SAT numbers on a wall chart and presents it as a "report card" on the success and failure of the nation's schools.**

**Is this where we have come in 60 years?**

- **Is it too much to hope that by the year 2000 we will have more subtle and more authentic ways to measure the potentiality and the progress of our students?**

**Howard Gardner, in his provocative book  
Frames of Mind,  
reminds us that children not only have verbal  
intelligence.**

**They also have**

- **logical intelligence,**
- **spatial intelligence,**
- **artistic intelligence,**
- **intuitive and social intelligence, too.**

**And these intelligences must be encouraged not  
neglected.**

**James Agee wrote on one occasion that**

- **with every child who is born, under no matter what circumstance, the potentiality of the human race is born again.**

**And this must be the vision for school assessment**

- **as we look to the year 2000 and beyond.**

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**V. CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**I have one final priority to propose**

- **one which some may consider simply a diversion.**

**But the longer it goes the more I'm beginning to suspect that the family is a more imperiled institution than the school and that the focus should be**

- **not just on the school,**
- **but on the family,**
- **and on the children of this country.**

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**In our survey of 22,000 teachers**

- **I was struck that the teachers talked as much about the kids and about families as they did about the school.**
- **90 percent reported that lack of parental support is a problem at their school.**
- **89 percent say that abused and neglected children is a problem.**
- **And 70 percent report poor health among their students.**

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**Nearly 11,000 teachers actually wrote comments about their work,**

- **and described in powerful and poignant fashion their deep concern about the desperation of their children.**

**One teacher put it this way:**

- **I'm sick and tired of seeing my bright-eyed first grade kids fade into the "shadows of apathy" and become deeply troubled by age 10.**
- **These kids desperately need parents who deeply care and appreciate their own children.**

**Teachers simply cannot do it all.**

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**Another teacher said that**

- **The difficult part of teaching is not the academics,**
- **the difficult part is dealing with the great number of kids who come from physically, socially, and financially stressed homes.**
  
- **Nearly all of my kindergarten kids come from single parent families. And we are raising a generation of emotionally stunted youth, who will, in turn, raise a similar generation.**

**What is the future of this country—this teacher asks—when we have so many needy children?**

**Last year we decided to go directly to the children.**

**We surveyed 5,000 5th and 8th graders—which I've already mentioned—we found that**

- **60 percent said they wish they could spend more time with their mothers and their fathers.**
- **2/3 say they often wish they had more things to do.**
- **And 30 percent say their family never sits down together to eat a meal.**

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**What we found—in a word—was alienation.**

**We found that—all too often—children are left to "drift aimlessly" after school.**

- **Too often they feel unneeded and unconnected to the larger world.**

**Doc Howe put it perfectly when he said that today's youth are**

- **an island in society**
- **so cut off**
- **but yearning to belong.**

**That's why I'm beginning to believe that we should start talking**

- **less about our schools**
- **and more about the condition of our children.**

**I don't mean to take principals and teachers off the hook.**

- **But as the teachers said—schools cannot do the job alone.**

**And yet we increasingly are asking educators to do what**

- **our families,**
- **our communities,**
- **our churches**

**have not been able to accomplish without giving them more money or support.**

**I really do think we're at a cross road.**

**Are the nations schools to be primary educational institutions**

- **supported by families and other agencies around them?**

**Or do we expect the schools to become social service agencies**

- **meeting not just the academic but also the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of children?**

**If that's the way we intend to go we'll have to renegotiate**

- **both the structure and the financing of the nation's schools.**

**We simply cannot do it on the cheap.**

**Parents simply must become more actively involved in the education of their children.**

**This means**

- **turning off TV from time to time.**
- **reading aloud to children.**
- **and making regular school visits.**

**Indeed, I'm convinced that all employers should give parents a day off, with pay, several times a year**

- **so they can go to school—  
have teacher conferences—and  
spend time with their children in  
the classroom.**

**Better schooling must become everybody's business.**

**Here, then, is my conclusion.**

**To achieve excellence for all:**

- **We must launch a national crusade to help the least advantaged.**
- **We must and reorganize the calendar and the clock and make school units smaller and more humane.**
- **We must have a curriculum with coherence.**
- **We must discover better ways to evaluate the performance of our students.**
- **And we must focus  
not just on schools,  
but on the needs of children, and  
get parents more actively  
involved.**

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**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 that the most urgent task**

- **our generation now confronts  
is the rebuilding of the nation's  
schools.**