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**THE NATION'S SCHOOLS:
PRIORITIES FOR A NEW CENTURY**

**Remarks by
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INTRODUCTION

This evening I've been asked to talk about

- **"the nation's schools: priorities for a new century."**

And I'd like to begin by taking a backward glance.

From the very first—education and the building of America—have been inextricably interlocked.

And frankly we should be celebrating—not criticizing—

- **one of America's most successful, most effective, institutions.**

It was in 1647—129 years before the Declaration of Independence—that the Massachusetts Bay Colony

- **passed a law requiring every town and village of 50 or more "souls"**
- **to hire a schoolmaster to teach all the children to read and write.**

Even in that day, education was far too important to be left to chance.

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George Washington declared that

- **knowledge is the "surest basis" of public happiness.**

John Jay said that

- **knowledge is the "soul" of the Republic.**

Daniel Webster declared that

- **it is the "duty of government" to provide for the instruction of all the nation's youth.**

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**Horace Mann called the common school
the "greatest discovery ever made by man."**

**And de Tocqueville—in his celebrated visit to the United States
concluded that**

- **the American people appear to be "the most
enlightened in the world."**

Frankly, I find it absolutely remarkable that

- **in the United States today**
- **45 million children "hurry off" each morning to 83,000 schools**
 - **from Bangor, Maine**
 - **to Mission Bay, California.**

And all of this has been accomplished

- **not by a Washington directive,**
- **but by local citizens committed to the audacious dream of**
"the common school for the common good."

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To put it simply—we have had for more than 300 years

- **a "grass roots" approach to public education,**
- **with leadership coming from the bottom up.**

NEW GOVERNANCE

But today this pattern of school governance

- **is being turned "upside down."**

For the first time in our history

- **the citizens of this country**
- **appear to be more concerned**
 - **about national outcomes**
 - **than about local school control.**

And in Washington we hear talk—almost daily

- **about national standards**
- **national curriculum**
- **and national school assessment.**

And I can only say that if, as Commissioner of Education, in the 1970s

- **I would have even "whispered" the word "national,"**
- **I would have been summarily dismissed.**
 - **Which may in itself have been a great contribution to excellence in education.**

The larger point I wish to make is that for the first time in our history, public education in this country is "going national,"

- **at the very time we hear talk about "school based" management at the local level.**

And how we respond to this contradiction

- **surely will shape the future of education**
 - **and the nation for years to come.**

READY TO LEARN

And speaking of "going national," I consider it enormously significant that

- **in his second State of the Union message, President George Bush announced**
- **six ambitious goals for all the nation's schools.**

And I must confess that it was the President's first goal

- **that I found most authentic and compelling.**

Mr. Bush declared

- **as the number one objective for the nation that**
- **by the year 2000 every child in America will come to school**
- **Ready to Learn.**

I recognize that this is an audacious, hugely optimistic, proposition.

And yet,

- **dreams can be fulfilled only when they've been defined.**

And if this nation would commit itself to little children

- **"school readiness" would truly become**
- **not just a slogan,**
- **but a serious call to action.**

I'm convinced that

- **all of the other goals would—in large measure—be fulfilled.**

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But I must tell you that we still have

- **a very long way to go.**

Just last month we released—at The Carnegie Foundation—a report called

- *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation.*

We propose, as a national strategy, seven essential steps:

Every child, we say, should have:

- 1. A Healthy Start**
- 2. Empowered Parents**
- 3. Quality Preschools**
- 4. Responsive Workplace**
- 5. Television That Teaches**
- 6. Neighborhoods for Learning**
- 7. Connections Across the Generations**

In preparing this report we surveyed more than 7,000 teachers

- **asking them about the school readiness of children.**

And frankly, I found it deeply troubling that according to these teachers

- **35 percent of the nation's kindergarten students—**
 - **more than one in three—**
- **are not well prepared for school.**

And it's doubly distressing that

- **40 percent of the teachers said that today's students are less well prepared**
 - **than they were five years ago.**
- **Only 20 percent said they're getting better.**

The harsh truth is that, in America today,

- **nearly one out of every four children under the age of 6 is officially classified as poor.**
- **They are undernourished, hugely disadvantaged.**

And if we continue to neglect the poor children in this country,

- **both the quality of education**
- **and the future of the nation will be imperiled.**

And it's absolutely irresponsible to blame to schools

- **for an education crisis that begins before school,**
- **and even before birth itself.**

A recent report by the Harvard School of Public Health revealed that

- **a child who is undernourished will have**
 1. **lower IQ,**
 2. **shorter attention span,**
 3. **and get lower grades in school.**

And yet one-fifth of the children in this country are hungry

- **sometime every month.**

And many are denied protein during the pregnancy of the mother

- **at the very time the child's brain cells are being formed.**

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Winston Churchill—who had a way with words—observed on one occasion that

- **there is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies.**

And it's absolutely clear that

- **if all children are to come to school ready to learn**
- **we simply must have good food for mothers and their children,**
- **since good nutrition and good schooling**
- **are inextricably interlocked.**

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PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

I'm also convinced that school readiness

- **means not just good health. It also means better preschool education for every disadvantaged child**
- **to help them overcome**
 - **not just poor nutrition**
 - **but linguistic deprivation, too.**

And frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that

- **two decades after the federal Head Start program was authorized by Congress to help three- and four-year-olds who are educationally at risk**
- **less than half of the eligible children are being served.**

To put it as bluntly as I can—

- **if we want all children to come to school ready to learn**
- **this surely means full funding of Head Start.**
- **Last week President Bush announced a \$600 million increase for the program,**
 - **a move that I applaud.**

But this means that several million three-year-olds still remain unserved.

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PARENT'S ROLE

I'm also convinced that if all children are to come to school ready to learn parents also must be partners in the process.

- **Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that childhood is for language.**
- **It's in the *first* years of life that children are empowered in the use of words.**
- **And its absolutely ludicrous to expect children to be "ready to learn"**
- **if they grow up in a home environment that is linguistically impoverished or if no one reads to them or if they fail to get answers to their questions.**

I'm suggesting that parents are the first and most essential teachers

- **and this means "turning off TV," from time to time.**
- **It means reading aloud to children at least 30 minutes every day.**
- **It means helping each child discover the miracle and the majesty of words.**

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And if all children are to come to school

- **ready to learn**

we simply must have

- **parent education programs in all 50 states that give priority to language—offered on a fee-for-service.**

And let's build a bridge

- **between parents and preschool programs and the school.**

President Bush put the challenge this way:

- **"Let no child in America," the President declared, "be forgotten or forsaken."**

And I'm convinced that fulfilling this inspired vision means

- **good nutrition,**
- **it means good parenting,**
- **and it means universal preschool education.**

THE BASIC SCHOOL

This brings me to priority #2.

I'm convinced that

- **if all children are to be well prepared for school,**
- **schools, in turn, must be ready for the children.**

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Several years ago—at the National Press Club—I proposed that

- **we reorganize the first years of formal learning**
- **into a single unit called the Basic School.**

The Basic School would combine kindergarten to grade 4.

- **It would give top priority to language,**
- **and every student from the very first would be**
 - **reading,**
 - **writing,**
 - **engaging in conversation**
 - **listening to stories**

in a climate the foreign language people like to call the saturation method.

- **Whole language method.**
- **Phonetic structure would be reinforced, as well.**

The Basic School would also give priority to the arts

- **since music**
- **and dance**
- **and painting**
- **are languages, too.**

And it's through the arts that children can express their deepest

- **feelings**
- **and ideas.**

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Further, in the Basic School there would be no class with more than 15 students each.

Frankly, I find it ludicrous to hear school critics say

- **class size doesn't matter,**
- **especially in the early years when children urgently need one on one attention.**

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SMALL STUDY TEAMS

In addition to small classes, I'd also like to see students

- **organized into small study teams**
- **that cooperate rather than compete.**

And looking to the year 2000, I'd like to see

- **computer work stations**
- **in each corner of the room**
- **with well qualified teachers assisting them as mentors.**

TEACHERS

Finally, in the Basic School, let's give

- **more dignity and**
- **more status to the teachers.**

Indeed, I'm convinced that if the nation would give as much status to first grade teachers

- **as we give to full professors**
- **that one act alone would revitalize the nation's schools.**

And I'm also convinced that most school critics

- **could not survive one week**
- **in the classrooms they so vigorously condemn.**

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I'm suggesting that the most important school restructuring steps America could take

- **would be to reorganize the first years of formal learning into a single unit**
 - **called the Basic School**
 1. **where students learn to cooperate rather than compete,**
 2. **where they use the "whole language" method,**
 3. **where teachers are well-trained,**
 4. **and where technology enriches the instruction.**

III. ASSESSMENT

This brings me to the issue of assessment.

In his State of the Union message the President also declared that

- **by the year 2000**
- **all students would be tested at the**
 - **4th,**
 - **8th,**
 - **and 12th grade levels**
- **in all the basic subjects,**
- **to see if they are academically proficient.**

I know there's danger in this goal.

- **And that many argue it should be vigorously opposed.**

But it's my own opinion that for educators to resist evaluation would be a big mistake.

- **The simple truth is that school accountability will be a central issue of the 90s.**
- **National assessment of "some form" is inevitable, I believe.**

And if educators themselves don't help shape the process

- **someone will do it for us.**

And it's for this reason that I've been working with the National Education Goals Panel to help evaluate Goal One.

Still, I do worry about where this "testing" goal may take us.

I worry that our current evaluation instruments are very crude.

I worry that we're asking students to

- **recall isolated facts,**
- **to fill in the bubbles**
- **to put check marks on the paper**
 - **which even chimpanzees can be trained to do.**

And in the process, we end up measuring that which matters least.

Howard Gardner, psychologist at Harvard, reminds us that children have

- **not only verbal intelligence,**

they also have

- **intuitive intelligence,**
- **social intelligence,**
- **spacial intelligence,**
- **aesthetic intelligence.**

And yet the tests we use today often screen out many of the intelligences that are most consequential!

- **And then we declare them failures before they discover who they are**
 - **or what they might become.**

CRAIG

Years ago my wife Kay and I were told by school officials that one of our children was a "special student"

- because of his performance on a single test
- and because as another teacher put it "he's a dreamer."

Craig did dream, of course. He dreamed about the stars and about places far away,

- but we were absolutely convinced that he was very gifted
- and that "somehow" his talents didn't match the routine of the school or the structure of the system.

Well, let the record show that for ten years this so-called "special student" has lived successfully in a Mayan village

- **he knows the language,**
- **he understands the culture,**
- **he runs Mayan schools,**
- **he builds fantastic bridges,**

and he survives living in conditions that would have totally defeated the psychometricians that concluded years ago he simply "couldn't learn."

Recently, I reflected on why the testers were so wrong in predicting Craig's success.

- And it suddenly occurred to me that the answer was quite simple. The problem was they didn't have the right instruments to measure his potential.
- They didn't have a test on how to survive in a Mayan village
- and they didn't have a test on how to build a bridge.

James Agee wrote on one occasion that

- with every child who is born—under no matter what circumstances—the potentiality of the human race is born again.
- And our challenge for the year 2000 is to evaluate our students in ways that can identify and celebrate their talent,
 - Not screen it out!

CURRICULUM

I have yet another worry about assessment.

I'm concerned that—with today's tests—we're inclined to focus

- **almost exclusively on "Carnegie Units."**
- **We're limiting our knowledge to isolated subjects.**

And—in the process—make it difficult,

- **if not impossible,**
- **for students to put their learning in perspective.**

When children are very small, they keep asking "why."

- **They seek connections.**

But as students climb up the academic ladder

- **we slide down the academic chute.**

We break up the curriculum into smaller and smaller units

- **and in the process learning often becomes a game of trivial pursuit.**

The profound truth is that

- **today's students will live in a world that is**
 - **politically,**
 - **economically, and**
 - **ecologically connected.**

And I'm convinced we need a curriculum—as well as a method of assessment—that helps students

- **gain a more coherent view of knowledge**
- **and a more integrated,**
- **more authentic view of life!**

Of course, we want students to be well informed.

- **But how do we measure creativity and critical thinking?**
- **And how do we measure wisdom that comes from integration?**

As a national strategy, I propose a 3-year moratorium on National Assessment and that during the decade of the nineties, master teachers in the school and researchers from all across the country be brought together

- **in a kind of peacetime Manhattan Project**
- **to design for the twenty-first century a new curriculum—and assessment process that focuses**
 - **not just on information,**
 - **but on integration, too.**

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If this nation can spend billions to bail out the S&Ls

- **why can't we find more creative and more effective ways**
- **to evaluate the progress and**
- **potential of our students?**

We simply must not do testing on the cheap!

I'm suggesting that

- **while we're restructuring the schools,**
- **let's also restructure the assessment,**
- **since in the end what we test will dictate**
 - **what and how we teach.**

III. SCHOOL CLIMATE

This brings me to the issue of school climate.

The President and Governors—as a sixth and final goal—declared that

- **by the year 2000**
- **every school in the United States will be "disciplined" and drug free.**

It's obvious that no one would quarrel with this objective

- **but where do we begin?**

During our study of the American high school, I became convinced that we have

- **not just a school problem**
- **but a youth problem in this country.**

I concluded that all too many teenagers feel

- **unwanted,**
- **unneded, and**
- **disconnected**

from the larger world.

Even in the school itself there's a spirit of anonymity.

- **And many students drop out simply because**
- **no one noticed that they have in fact dropped in.**

SMALL SCHOOLS

If I had just one wish

- I'd break up every large school into units of no more than 400 students each.
- I'd assign every student to a "family unit" of 15-20 students to meet with mentors at the beginning of each day
 - to talk about their school work,
 - to share their hopes and fears,
 - and to know that someone truly cares.

TRANSITION SCHOOL

And speaking of restructuring, I'd also reorganize the last 2 years of high school into a more "flexible" unit called

- The Transition School.

A time when students

- would not only come to class,
- but would also have assignments outside the school
 - to learn to work,
 - and also learn to serve.

Vachel Lindsay wrote on one occasion:

**It is the world's one crime
Its babes grow dull
Not that they sow—
but that they seldom reap
Not that they serve—
but have no God to serve
not that they die—
But that they die like sheep.**

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I'm convinced the tragedy of life is not death.

The tragedy is to die with

- **commitments undefined,**
- **convictions undeclared,**
- **service unfulfilled.**

And it's for this reason that in the Carnegie Report, *High School*, we proposed a new Carnegie unit,

a community service program

- **in day-care centers,**
- **in youth camps,**
- **in retirement villages,**

so students can

- **have a larger sense of purpose,**
- **see a connection between what they learn and how they live.**

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Martin Luther King said

- **everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.**

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

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V. PARTNERSHIP

This leads me to one final observation.

Today, we hear endlessly about how the schools have failed

- **and surely education must improve.**

But the longer it goes, the more I am convinced

- **it's not the school that's failed,**
- **it's the partnership that's failed.**

Several years ago at The Carnegie Foundation we surveyed 22,000 teachers and I was struck that

- 90 percent reported that lack of parental support is a problem at their school.
- 89 percent say that "abused" or "neglected" children is a problem.
- And 70 percent report "poor health" among their students.

One teacher put it this way:

- "I'm sick and tired," she said, "of seeing my bright-eyed first grade kids
- fade into the 'shadows of apathy' and become deeply troubled by age 10."

Another teacher said that the difficult part of teaching is not the academics.

The difficult part is dealing with the great numbers of kids

- **who come from physically, socially, and financially stressed homes.**

What is the future of this country, this teacher asks,

- **when we have so many needy children?**

Last year we also surveyed 5,000 5th and 8th graders and we found that

- 40 percent said they go home to an empty house.
- 60 percent said they wish they could spend more time with their mothers and fathers.
- Two-thirds said they often wish they had more things to do.
- And 30 percent said their family never sits down together to eat a meal.

The simple truth is that today's young people are growing up in a world that is

- **spiritually impoverished.**

Their major contact with the adult world is through TV, records, and videocassettes, where they are fed a steady diet of

- **sex**
- **and violence and war and racial epithets and obscenities**
- **that degrade the sacredness of life.**

Our children are being told a dozen times a day how "cool" it is to destroy their bodies with cigarettes and alcohol.

And then we wonder why the schools aren't

- **disciplined and drug free!**

I'm suggesting that the nation's schools are becoming hopelessly overburdened.

They're being asked to respond to almost every pathology of the culture,

- **and do what the**
 - **homes,**
 - **families,**
 - **and churches**
- **have not been able to do.**

And if they fail anywhere along the line we condemn them

- **for not meeting our high minded expectations.**

Let's agree that by the year 2000 all schools will be disciplined and drug free.

But let's also agree that in achieving this objective the responsibility lies

- **not just with the schools,**
- **but above all it lies with the community as well.**

CONCLUSION

John Gardner said on one occasion that

Here, then, is my conclusion.

You can't build it

To achieve better education leading to the Pharaohs of the

- **let's focus on the school readiness of children,**
- **let's reorganize K through grade 4, generation,**
- **let's evaluate to help children—not restrict them,**
- **let's break up basic schools into smaller units,**
- **and above all let's rebuild the partnership between the school and the community it serves.**

And—above all—is recognition to the future of our children.