

**QUALITY EDUCATION: THE NATION'S SCHOOLS,  
THE NATION'S CHILDREN**

**Remarks by  
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## **SCHOOL**

**This evening I've been asked to talk about**

- **the quality of education in America.**

**And reflect on how the nation's schools**

- **can help this country meet its**
- **civic and economic obligations**

**in the century ahead.**

**And perhaps the best place to begin is January 20, 1990**

- **when President George Bush—in his second State of the Union message—**
  - **announced 6 ambitious goals**
  - **for all the nation's schools.**

**On that occasion, the president—as a first objective for the nation—declared 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, during the decade of the 1990s,**

- **the school readiness of children would 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.**

**NOT READY**

**But I also must tell you that**

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

**Just last fall at The Carnegie Foundation**

- **we surveyed more than 7,000 kindergarten teachers from coast to coast,**
- **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—**
- **come to school not well-prepared for formal education.**

**They were deficient**

- **in language,**
- **in general knowledge,**
- **in social development,**
- **and in health.**

**And it's our disadvantaged children who are most at risk.**

## **HEALTH**

**The harsh truth is that,**

- **in America today,**
- **nearly one out of every four children**
  - **under the age of six**
  - **is officially classified as poor.**

**They're malnourished, hugely disadvantaged**

- **long before they march off to formal education.**

**Today, more than twelve million children in this country are hungry**

- **some time every month.**

**And one-fourth of all pregnant women in this country**

- **have belated prenatal care,**
- **or none at all**
- **which dramatically endangers the brain development of unborn infants.**

**And if—in this country—we continue to neglect the poor children, I'm convinced that**

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

**Winston Churchill—who had a way with words—declared 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 well prepared to learn,**
- **we simply must have good food for mothers and their children,**
  - **since good nutrition and good schooling**
  - **are inseparably interlocked.**

## PRESCHOOL

**But beyond a healthy start—for mothers and for babies—**

- **school readiness also means quality preschool for every disadvantaged child,**
  
- **to help them overcome**
  - **not just poor nutrition,**
  
  - **but linguistic deprivation, too.**

**To put it as bluntly as I can:**

- **If we want all children to be "ready to learn"**
- **this surely means full funding of Head Start.**

**And frankly I consider it a national disgrace that**

- **two decades after Head Start was authorized by Congress,**
- **less than half the eligible children are being served.**
- **It's like having a vaccine for a dreaded disease**
- **and callously denying it to youngsters.**

## **PARENTS**

**I'm suggesting that**

- **school readiness means a healthy start.**
- **It means preschool for every disadvantaged child.**

**But being "well prepared" for school**

- **also means empowered parents.**



**Parents are, after all, the first and most essential teachers.**

**And if all children are to come to school ready to learn**

- **we simply must have parents**
  - **who first give love,**
- **speak regularly to their children,**
- **respond thoughtfully to their questions,**
- **and who read to them at least 30 minutes every day.**

## TELEVISION

**And while speaking of school readiness and language,**

- **I'd like to say just one word**
- **about the influence television is having on our children.**

**We have, in the United States today,**

- **19 million preschoolers.**

**And, according to the most recent estimates, these children**

- **watch television**
- **14 billion hours every single year.**

**On Saturday morning,**

- **during the so-called children's hour,**

**The youngsters of this country are "served up"**

- **a steady diet of junk food commercials,**
- **and cartoons that contain—on average—**
  - **26 acts of violence every single hour.**

**And then we wonder why we have troubled schools**

- **and violence in the streets.**

**In the new Carnegie report, called "Ready to Learn," we propose that**

- **a ready to learn "children's" channel be established.**

**After all, we have cable channels for**

- **news,**
- **and sports,**
- **and weather,**
- **and sex.**

**Is it unthinkable that we would have**

- **at least one channel devoted exclusively to the education of young children?**

**I'm suggesting that school readiness means**

- **good health.**
- **It means good nutrition.**
- **It means good parenting.**
- **It means universal preschool education,**
- **and it also means television that enriches rather than degrades the lives of children.**

## THE BASIC SCHOOL

**But there is another side to the equation.**

- **And while all children must be well prepared for school,**
- **it's also true that all schools**
- **must be ready for the children.**

**And this means**

- **a major restructuring of public education,**
- **especially in the early years of learning.**

**Several years ago—at the National Press Club—I proposed that we reorganize the first years of formal education**

- **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 what the foreign language people like to call the saturation method**



**Let me pause to make one essential point. Language is the most essential function. Our proficiency with words, our use of symbols, allows us to be connected to one another.**

**And every child by the time they leave 4th grade must have the capacity to**

- **read with comprehension**
- **write with clarity, and**
- **effectively speak and listen.**

**Class size is crucial, too.**

**And in the Basic School there would be no class with more than 15 students.**

**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.**

**I've never taught K or first grade. But I have 10 grandchildren, and when we go to McDonald's, I know how much attention they need.**

## **TEACHERS**

**Finally, in the Basic School, let's give**

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

**I'm suggesting that excellence in education means excellence in teaching.**

**I'm convinced that if we'd give as much status to first grade teachers**

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

**I'm also convinced that most school critics**

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

**And for teachers at all levels, I'd like to see a**

- **"career ladder" for teachers,**
- **one in which good teachers would be rewarded for their work.**

**I'd also like to see a dramatically expanded in-service education program—**

- **one in which teachers would have at least a full day each month, or**
- **one week at the beginning and the end of the school year,**
- **to focus on professional assignments.**

**The teacher training program also might be extended to 5 years—**

- **with the fifth year focusing exclusively on a classroom experience,**
- **with the new teachers working closely with a mentor.**

**Above all, let's have more teacher recognition.**

**Frankly, I'd like to see the president invite**

- **the teacher of the year to a dinner in the East Room of the White House,**
- **declaring to the nation that teachers are the unsung heroes of the nation.**

## SCHOOL CLIMATE

**This brings me, finally,**

- **to the upper grades of formal education.**

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

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

**Again, an absolutely noteworthy goal,**

- **but where do we begin?**

**During our study of the American high school several years ago, I became convinced that what we really have**

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

**As we went from school to school it became clear that all too many teenagers feel**

- **unwanted and**
- **unneded and**
- **unconnected to the larger world,**
- **with the old increasingly separated from the young.**

**Large schools are impersonal, often depressing, institutions, and I'm convinced that many students drop out**

- **simply because no one noticed that they had, in fact, dropped in.**



**Frankly 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 circle" 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.**

**Vachel Lindsay wrote:**

**It's 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 gods to serve.**

**Not that they die,  
But that they die like sheep.**

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

**And it's for this reason that we propose in the Carnegie report,  
*High School*, 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, and**
- **see a connection between what they learn and how they live.**

**John Gardner said on one occasion,**

**a nation is never finished,**

**you can't leave it standing,**

**as the pharaohs did the pyramids.**

**It has to be rebuilt with each new generation.**

**And I'm convinced the most urgent task our generation now confronts**

- **is to strengthen the schools and higher education.**
- **And, above all, to build a better world for children,**
  - **who are, after all,**
  - **the future of the nation.**