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READY TO LEARN: A MANDATE FOR THE NATION

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much.

I am deeply honored to join you at this 45th annual convention of the

- **American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.**
- **And I'm especially pleased to be asked to deliver the Charles W. Hunt Lecture,**

recognizing that those assembled in the room

- **are engaged—each day—**
- **in the heroic task of preparing teachers for future generations.**

READY TO LEARN

This evening I've been asked to talk about the "school readiness" of children,

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

when President George Bush,

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

All of the goals were appealing.

But I must confess that it was the first goal that I found most

- **forward looking**
- **and compelling.**

The president declared

- **as the "number one" education objective for the nation**
- **that, by the year 2000,**
- **every child in American will**
 - **come to school—"Ready to Learn."**

I realize that this is,

- **an audacious,**
- **hugely optimistic proposition.**

And yet,

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

- **And if—during the decade of the 1990s—**
 - **school readiness would indeed**
 - **become a mandate for the nation,**

- **I'm convinced that**
 - **all of the other goals**
 - **would, in large measure, be fulfilled.**

But how should we proceed?

- **How can we assure that every child is well prepared for school?**

In response to this challenge,

- **we at The Carnegie Foundation prepared**
- **a special report last year entitled**
 - ***Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation.***

And we conclude that if all children are to be well prepared for school

- **7 priorities must be vigorously pursued.**

I. HEALTHY START

As a first priority for school readiness, we say in our report that

- **every child should have a healthy start,**
- **since good health and good education**
 - **are inextricably connected.**

But I must tell you that we have a very long way to go.

The harsh truth is that:

- 1. in America today, nearly one-fourth of all children under the age of 6**
 - are officially classified as poor, and**

- 2. one out of five pregnant women in this country has belated prenatal care**
 - or none at all.**

3. In America today, about 40,000 babies are damaged during pregnancy
 - by the mother's alcohol abuse.

5. More than 20 percent of children are born to mothers addicted to
 - cocaine,
 - marijuana,
 - crack,
 - or heroin.

And then we wonder why millions of our children come to school

- each year not well prepared for formal learning!

My wife Kay—who's a certified nurse midwife—

- **has delivered many babies,**
- **including 7 grandchildren of our own.**

She has worked with teen-age girls,

- **and she'd come home night after night**
- **telling about children having children.**

She'd describe how these teenage girls had—

- **for nine months—fed their unborn infants on coke and potato chips,**

youngsters, who did not know

- **what was happening to their own bodies**
- **and were given the basic facts of life**
 - **in between the labor pains.**

In the new Carnegie report, we call for the "full funding" of WIC-

- **the federal nutrition program that gives food to poor mothers and their babies.**

And we also call for

- **a network of primary health clinics in every community in the nation to assure that**
 - **every mother and**
 - **every baby**
- **is medically well attended.**

I'm suggesting that

- **good education begins with good nutrition.**

- **And ready to learn means—above all else—**
 - **giving to every child a healthy start.**

II. EMPOWERED PARENTS

This leads to priority #2.

In the new Carnegie report, we say that every child—to be well prepared for school—will need

- **not just a healthy start,**
- **but also empowered parents.**

Parents are, after all, the

- **first and most essential teachers.**

It's in the home where the foundation for educational excellence must be laid.

And if all children are to be well prepared for school,

- **we simply must have mothers and fathers**
- **who first give love,**
- **then language, to their children.**

Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that

- **childhood is for language.**

And wouldn't it be wonderful if every home

- **had good books**
- **instead of knick knacks and plastic flowers on the book shelves?**

And wouldn't it be great if every child

- **heard good speech and**
- **received thoughtful answers to their questions,**
- **instead of "shut up" or "go to bed."**

To achieve the essential goals, we propose in the Carnegie report

- **that each state launch a "school-based" parent education program.**
- **We urge that all parents read aloud to their children**
 - **at least 30 minutes every day.**

And we recommend that every school district organize

- **a preschool PTA**
 - **to begin to build a bridge between the home and school.**

Historian Will Durant called the family

- **the nucleus of civilization.**

For all children to come to school

- **ready to learn,**
- **we simply must have empowered parents.**

III. PRESCHOOL

This leads me to priority #3.

- **Beyond a healthy start and**
- **beyond empowered parents,**
- **school readiness also means**
 - **quality preschool**
 - **for every disadvantaged child,**
- **to help them overcome**
 - **not just poor nutrition,**
 - **but social and linguistic deprivation, too.**

I recognize, as Ed Zigler has just reminded us,

- **that not all Head Start programs are succeeding.**

The evidence, however, is absolutely overwhelming that a quality preschool experience—

- **especially for children most at risk—**
- **can be enormously beneficial.**
- **And yet millions of needy children remain neglected.**

And frankly I consider it a national disgrace that

- **nearly 30 years after Head Start was authorized by Congress**
- **less than 40 percent of the eligible children are being served.**

It's like having a vaccine for a dreaded disease

- **and callously denying it to children.**

- **How is it that America can spend \$100 billion**
 - **to bail out the S&Ls?**

- **How is it that we can spend**
 - **\$300 billion every year on national defense?**

- **How is it that we can send**
 - **space shuttles into orbit?**

And never seem to have enough money for our children?

Again, the good news is that President Clinton has declared his commitment

- **to fully fund Head Start.**

And our next goal must be

- **to raise the salaries of preschool teachers,**
- **and bring more dignity and more status to these unsung heroes**
- **who care for children during their most consequential years.**

IV. A RESPONSIVE WORKPLACE

This leads to priority #4

In the new Carnegie report, we say that,

- **if all children are to be well prepared for school,**
- **we simply must have family-friendly policies in the workplace**
- **so that working parents can spend more time with their children.**

In yesterday's agrarian society most families lived on farms

- **and mothers and fathers and their children**
- **worked side by side.**

Life was hard, the hours long,

- **but "work life"**
- **and "home life"**
- **were inextricably intertwined.**

Today, most parents work outside the home,

- **including 60 percent of all mothers with preschool children.**

And according to sociologist Arlie Hochschild,

- **the "job culture" has expanded**
- **at the expense of the "family culture."**

Several years ago a kindergarten teacher in Missouri put it this way:

- **"I believe parents love their children.**
- **But in today's society everyone works—and they are plain tired.**
- **After all, the job comes first."**

In the new Carnegie report we insist that the school readiness of children simply must involve the workplace.

- 1. We call for "flextime" arrangements,**
 - so that home and family obligations can be better blended.**
- 2. We call for more "child care" programs in the workplace.**
- 3. We propose "parenting days"—time off with pay—**
 - so mothers and fathers can occasionally spend time with their children**
 - in day care centers,**
 - in preschools,**
 - or in school itself.**

And, above all, we call for a national parental leave program

- **so parents can bond with newborns.**
- **In Finland, working women get 35 weeks of parental leave with full salary.**
- **In Japan, women have the right to a 3-month leave at 60 percent pay.**
- **In Germany, mothers are eligible for a fully paid leave beginning 6 weeks before a baby's birth and ending 6 weeks after.**

And—again—it's enormously reassuring that a maternal leave bill was just enacted into law

- **that at least provides "unpaid" leave arrangements for parents.**

Sociologist Robert N. Bellah said that:

- **"It might appear at the moment,**
- **economic competitiveness is such an obsession,**
- **that Americans 'can't afford' to think about the family**
..."

"Nothing," he said, "could be more shortsighted.

- **"In the long run our economic life," Bellah said,**
- **"depends on the quality of people."**

V. TRANSITION

Thus far I've focused on four priorities that touch family life directly:

- **a healthy start**
- **empowered parents**
- **quality preschool**
- **and family friendly policies in the workplace.**

But in the Carnegie report, *Ready to Learn*, we felt compelled to include

- **3 other forces in the larger social context**
- **that also profoundly shapes the lives of children.**

V. TELEVISION

Surely the most

- **powerful and**
- **pervasive influence**

in a child's life—beyond the parent—is TV,

- **which penetrates almost every home**
- **and profoundly shapes the environment of our children.**

The harsh truth is that in America today

- **the nation's 19 million preschoolers watch television**
- **14 billion hours every single year.**

They are glued to the screen—2 to 3 hours every single day.

- **And yet what they see**
 - **is, for me, enormously depressing.**

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 children,**
- **failing schools,**
- **and violence in the streets.**

Frankly, I consider it a shocking indictment of our culture that

- **not one of the four major TV networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX—**
- **has one single hour of educational programming exclusively for young children.**

In response to this unspeakable neglect,

- **we propose in the Carnegie report that**
- **a "Ready to Learn" children's cable channel be created.**

After all, we have channels

- **for news**
- **and sports**
- **and weather**
- **and sex**
- **and for junk jewelry.**

Is it unthinkable that we would have at least one channel

- **devoted exclusively to young children?**

The good news is that—as a follow-up to our report—Congress passed, just 3 months ago,

- **a "Ready to Learn" bill**
- **that proposes preschool programming on PBS stations all across the country.**

And just 2 months ago I received a letter from the president of the

- **Learning Channel**
- **announcing the intention of that cable channel**
- **to devote 6 hours of programming for preschool children every single day.**

And I'm happy to report that

- **the series called, *Ready, Set, Learn*, which runs from 6 a.m. to noon, is already on the air.**

In the summer of 1938, essayist E.B. White observed:

- **"I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world . . .**

"We shall discover either

- **a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace**
- **or a saving radiance in the sky.**

"We shall stand or fall by television," White said,

- **"of that I am quite sure."**

That challenge is even more urgent now.

And I'm convinced that if the nation's

- **19 million preschoolers are to be well prepared for school,**
- **we simply must have television**
 - **that enriches**
 - **rather than degrades.**

VI. NEIGHBORHOODS FOR LEARNING

This leads to priority #6.

The lives of little children are influenced

- **not just by television,**
- **but by neighborhoods as well,**
- **by the environment they encounter out on the street.**

There was a time when neighborhoods were safe, supportive places for young children.

But in recent years we've become more concerned

- **about cars**
- **than kids.**

During the past 50 years, in the name of urban renewal,

- **we've constructed glitzy banks and glittering new hotels**
 - **that look like Taj Mahals.**
- **We've erected high-rise apartments and office towers**
 - **that soar into the sky.**
- **We've built dazzling shopping malls**
- **and high-speed highways.**

But somehow we've neglected the concerns of children.

Several years ago at The Carnegie Foundation, we surveyed 5,000 5th and 8th graders.

- **And more than half agreed that "there are not a lot of good places to play in my neighborhood."**

An 8th grader spoke for many when she said:

- **"I'm often scared going back and forth to school."**

And a teacher in Madison, Wisconsin told a Carnegie researcher:

- **"Many of my children come to school worried about the violence in their neighborhood."**

In response to this scandalous neglect,

- **we recommend in the Carnegie report that every city, town, and village**
 - **have a network of "outdoor" and indoor parks**
 - **and—if necessary—close off city streets to create instant playgrounds.**

We propose that all libraries, museums, and zoos be well funded and

- **that they establish "school readiness" programs for preschoolers.**

We urge that every shopping mall have

- **a "Ready to Learn" center-**
- **a place where young children can engage in play and learning.**

And we propose that every community might

- **replace its "school board" with a "children's board,"**
- **to shift the focus from the bureaucracy of education to the needs of children,**
- **and begin to create in every community neighborhoods for learning.**

VII. CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

This brings me finally to priority #7.

We say in the Carnegie report that

- if all children are to be well prepared for school, we must look**
- not just at neighborhoods**
- but at the values of the total culture**
- and begin to rebuild**
 - connections across the generations.**

Looking back, the most important mentor in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer—

- **who incidentally lived to be 100.**

Grandpa, at the age of 40,

- **moved his little family into the slums of Dayton.**

He then spent the next 40 years running a city mission—

- **working for the poor,**
- **teaching me that to be "truly human" one must serve.**

And yet, for far too many children

- **these "intergenerational models" have diminished.**

Margaret Mead said on one occasion that

- **the health of any culture is sustained**
- **when 3 generations are vitally interacting with each other.**

And yet in America today we're creating a horizontal culture,

- **each generation living all alone-**
- **infants are in nurseries,**
- **toddlers in day care,**
- **older children are in schools arranged by age.**
- **College students are isolated on campuses, living in a climate of low-grade decadence.**
- **Adults are in the workplace.**
- **And older citizens are in retirement villages,**
 - **living and dying all alone.**

In the Carnegie report we say

- **the time has come to break up the age ghettos.**

It's time to build "intergenerational" institutions

- **that bring the old and young together.**

For several years, my own parents lived in a retirement village

- **where the average age was 80.**

But they had a "day care" center there,

- **and all the 3- and 4-year olds had adopted grandparents**
- **to meet with every day and have a sense of bonding.**

Incidentally, I heard recently that the reason grandparents and grandchildren get along so well together is that they have

- **a common enemy.**

Still, cynics notwithstanding, I'm convinced there's

- **something magical about bringing the old and young together.**
 - **Children see the courage and pain of growing older,**
 - **and the elders are inspired by the energy and innocence of youth.**

If school readiness is our goal,

- **we simply must find ways to strengthen connections**
 - **across the generations,**
- **so that young children can not only gain caring**
- **but perspective.**

SUMMARY

In summary, then, school readiness means:

- 1. a healthy start,**
- 2. quality preschool,**
- 3. empowered parents,**
- 4. a responsive workplace,**
- 5. television that teaches,**
- 6. neighborhoods for learning, and**
- 7. building connections across the generations.**

And, above all, it means creating in this country

- a public love of children.**

THE BASIC SCHOOL

But before closing let me make the absolutely crucial point.

- **If all children are to be well prepared for school,**
- **it's equally important that**
 - **all schools be ready for the children.**

At The Carnegie Foundation, we're preparing a new report called

- ***The Basic School,***
- **which calls for a restructuring of primary education.**

The Basic School would combine

- **kindergarten through grade 4.**

It would engage all parents in a "Covenant for Learning."

It would include integrated services.

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 that

- **"class size doesn't matter,"**

especially in the early years,

- **which is precisely the time when children urgently need**
- **one-on-one attention.**

I've never taught kindergarten or first grade, but I do have grandchildren, and frankly, just taking 4 or 5 of them to McDonalds

- **is a hugely complicated task:**
 - **getting on the boots,**
 - **taking all the orders—which keep changing,-**
 - **wiping up the milkshake,**
 - **and keeping ketchup off the floor.**

But teaching 15 or 20 children is a far more complicated task.

And I'm convinced that most school critics

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

In the Basic School we also are

- **preparing a new integrated curriculum**
- **based not on the old Carnegie units, but on what we call the**
 - **8 human commonalities that bind us all together.**

TESTING

We also insist in our new report that there should be

- **no national standardized testing of children**
- **during the first 4 years of formal education.**

The assessment we say should be

- **in the classroom, with the teachers,**
- **who know the children best.**

More than 30 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.**
- He dreamed about how he could go out and play.**
- But we were absolutely convinced**
 - that he was gifted**
 - and that "somehow" his talents just didn't match the routine of the classroom 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, where

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

And he's survived living in conditions that would have totally defeated the psychometricians

- who concluded years ago he simply "couldn't learn."**

Recently, I reflected on why the testers were so wrong.

And it suddenly occurred to me that the answer was quite simple. The problem was:

- They didn't have a test on how to survive in a Mayan village.**
- They didn't have a test on how to build a bridge.**
- They don't have an examination on how to**
 - understand emphatically the beauty of another culture.**

James Agee wrote on one occasion,

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

And what we urgently need today

- **are new procedures of assessment**
- **that focus not just on verbal intelligence, but on**
 - **social,**
 - **intuitive,**
 - **aesthetic, and**
 - **spatial intelligence,**
- **tests that measure something more**
- **than that which matters least.**

TEACHERS

Finally, if all schools are to be ready for the children,

- **we simply must give more dignity**
- **and more status to teachers,**
- **especially in the early grades.**

And I'm convinced that if this country 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 may I specifically suggest that President Clinton

- invite the teachers of the year from all 50 states**
- to a dinner in the East Room of the White House,**
- which might be televised "prime time."**

After all, we invite visiting dignitaries from overseas:

- Why not invite teachers from**
 - Kansas,**
 - Georgia,**
 - and New York,**
- who are the unsung heroes of the nation.**

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is my conclusion.

The nation's first education goal—readiness for all—is everybody's business.

- **It's a pledge America has made,**
 - **not only to itself,**
 - **but most especially to its children.**

And what is crueler than to make a pledge to children

- **and then walk away?**

And while preparing all children for school,

- let's also prepare all schools for children,**
- giving top priority in this country**
 - to the first 10 years of life.**

Recently my good friend, Marian Wright Edelman,

- sent me a copy of a commencement speech she delivered,**
- which ended with a prayer.**

And it occurred to me that with a bit of paraphrasing,

- this prayer might be an appropriate way to close my remarks this evening.**

The prayer reads:

"Dear Lord we pray for our children

- **who like to be tickled,**
- **who sneak Popsicles before supper,**
- **who can never find their shoes.**

"And we pray for children

- **who can't run down the street in a new pair of sneakers,**
- **who never get dessert,**
- **who don't have any rooms to clean up,**
- **and whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser.**

PRAYER

"Dear Lord we pray for children

- **who spend their allowance before Tuesday,**
- **who throw tantrums in the grocery store,**
- **who pick at their food,**
- **who squirm in church and temple,**
- **and who scream into the phone.**

"And we pray for children

- **whose nightmares come in the light of day,**
- **who will eat anything,**
- **who have never seen a dentist,**
- **who aren't spoiled by anybody,**
- **and who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep.**

"We pray for those

- **we smother with love.**

"And we pray especially for those

- **who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to hold it.**

Children are, after all, our most precious resource.

And if we as a nation

- **cannot help the coming generation,**
- **if we cannot prepare all children**
- **for learning**
- **and for life,**
- **then just what will bring us all together?**

They are, after all, our future,

- **they're all we have!**