Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation

Ernest L. Boyer
President
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
Annual Meeting
February 24-27, 1993
San Diego, California

I am delighted to join you at this 45th annual convention of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education. I'm especially pleased to be invited to deliver the Charles W. Hunt lecture, and I extend to everyone assembled in this room my greatest admiration. You are engaged every single day in the heroic task of preparing teachers—professionals who will most profoundly influence future generations—and I know of no other more sacred calling.

This evening I have been asked to talk about the school readiness of children. Perhaps the best place to begin is January 20, 1990, when President George Bush, in his second State of the Union message, announced for the first time in our history six ambitious goals for all the nation's schools. I found all of the goals fascinating, but I found the first one the most forward looking, most compelling. The President declared as the number one educational objective for the nation that by the year 2000 every child in America will come to school "ready to learn." We understand, of course, that children begin to learn even before they take their first breath. What is really being advocated is a national commitment to provide a nourishing climate for very young children so that their first school experiences will be most appealing and productive and their potential as students most fully realized.

This is, I understand, an audacious, hugely optimistic proposition. Indeed, some of my friends upon hearing about the first national goal dismissed it as wholly

unrealistic. But my response is, "What did you expect the President to say, that by the year 2000, *half* the children will come to school ready to learn?" Dreams can be fulfilled only when they've been defined, and if, during the decade of the 1990s, school readiness would indeed become a mandate for the nation, I am convinced that all of the other goals would in large measure be fulfilled. So let's accept, as an absolutely essential educational and moral obligation, that we will do right by children and pledge that all will come to school well prepared for formal learning.

But how should we proceed? At The Carnegie Foundation last year, we prepared a special report entitled *Ready to Learn: A Mandate for the Nation*. We concluded that if all children are, in fact, to be well prepared for school, there are seven priorities that should be vigorously pursued.

I.

As a first priority for school readiness, every child in this country should have a healthy start, since good health and good education are inextricably interlocked. But we have a very long way to go. The harsh truth is that in America today nearly one-fourth of all children under the age of six is officially classified as poor. One out of five pregnant women in this country has belated prenatal care or none at all. In America today, over forty thousand babies are damaged during pregnancy by the mother's alcohol abuse. More than 10 percent of the children are born to mothers who used cocaine, marijuana, crack, heroin, or amphetamines during pregnancy. And then we wonder why millions of our children come to school each year not well prepared to learn.

During the Foundation's work on this report, over seven thousand kindergarten teachers responded to our survey asking them about the school readiness of children. They reported that the previous year 35 percent of the children coming into kindergarten were deficient linguistically or emotionally or socially or nutritionally.

These children, in fact, had been harmed and were already behind before their first day of school.

Health—the lack of good nutrition and medical care, even prenatally—is an issue consequentially related to school readiness. Health policy and education policy must be linked.

My wife is a certified nurse-midwife. She has delivered many babies throughout the years, including seven grandchildren of our own. She has worked with pregnant teenage girls and she has come home night after night talking about children having children. She has described how these teenage girls had, for nine months, fed their unborn infants on Coke and potato chips. These girls had no knowledge of what was happening to their own bodies even during birth. They were given the basic facts of life in between the labor pains.

In the new Carnegie report we call for full funding of WIC, the federal nutrition program that gives food to poor mothers and their babies. We also call for a network of primary health clinics in every community in this nation to assure that every mother and every baby is medically well attended. It always strikes me as fascinating that this country has built eighty-three thousand schools from Bangor, Maine, to Honolulu, Hawaii, not as a federal mandate but as a grassroots commitment to serve the educational needs of our children, but we haven't created a network of neighborhood health clinics to give children access to good health, which is even more important than access to education.

Indeed, I would hope that, given the interrelationships just discussed, our schools might come to accommodate more of the health services which are so intimately interlocked with educational readiness. "Ready to learn" means, above all else, giving every child a healthy start.

II.

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. And yet, I'm convinced that the family is a more imperiled institution than the school, and that schools are being asked to do what families and communities and churches have not been able to accomplish.

Several years ago at the Foundation, we surveyed five thousand fifth- and eighth-graders, and 40 percent of them said they go home every afternoon to an empty house, 60 percent said they wished they had more things to do, 60 percent said they wished they could spend more time with their mothers and fathers, and 30 percent said their family never sits down together to eat a meal. While this country is rightly concerned with improving the schools, we also urgently need to focus attention on how to strengthen families, because by the time the child comes to kindergarten, the infrastructure for learning—for better or worse—has already been established.

The foundation for academic excellence simply must be laid in the home. If all children are to be well prepared for school, we must have mothers and fathers who first give love, then language, to their children. Indeed, language begins even before birth as the unborn infant monitors the mother's voice. It's no accident that the three middle ear bones—the hammer, the anvil, and the stirrup—are the only bones that are fully formed at birth. We listen before we speak, and then following birth, language exponentially explodes.

Now that I'm a grandfather and can observe this process unencumbered by burpings and dirty diapers late at night, I'm absolutely dazzled by the capacity of two- and three-year-olds to use language not only for affection but as weapons of assault. When I was growing up in Dayton, Ohio, we used to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." What nonsense. Hit me with a stick, but stop the words that penetrate so deeply.

Children learn how to manage the syntax of this mysterious capacity we call language. I saw in the *Washington Post* several weeks ago a summary of research concluded in Cambridge, England, demonstrating that the phonetic structures of language, the building blocks of language, are established and recognizable by children at eighteen months. Babies are building their framework of language and verbalization in the earliest months. When children come to school, we don't teach them language; we build on a symbol system that is already well established, provided the children grew up in a preschool environment that linguistically empowered them.

Lewis Thomas wrote on one occasion that "childhood is for language." Wouldn't it be wonderful if every home had good books instead of knick-knacks and plastic flowers in the bookshelves? 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 our educational goals, we propose in the Carnegie report that each state launch a school-based parent education program so that every parent is given opportunities to receive guidance in the essential task of parenting. We urge that all parents read aloud to their children at least thirty minutes every day. And we recommend that every school district organize a preschool PTA to begin building a bridge between the home and the school—not waiting until the child enters kindergarten, but at the time of birth. 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.

Beyond a healthy start and empowered parents, school readiness also means quality preschool for every disadvantaged child, to help overcome not just poor nutrition but social and linguistic deprivation, too. I recognize that not all Head Start

programs are succeeding, but the evidence is overwhelming that a quality preschool experience, especially for children most at risk, can be enormously beneficial. And yet millions of needy children are neglected.

Frankly, I consider it a national disgrace that nearly thirty years after Head Start was authorized by Congress, less than 40 percent of the eligible children are being served. What's the analogy? It's like having a vaccine for a dread disease and callously and capriciously 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 each year on national defense? How is it that we can continue to send space shuttles into orbit and never seem to have enough money for our children?

Well, the good news is that President Clinton has declared his commitment to fully fund Head Start. Let's get that established. But our next goal must be to raise the salaries of preschool teachers and bring more dignity and more status to these unsung heroes. It's just amazing to me how much we neglect those who are teaching the children at the very time children are learning the most. These teachers do the most and, frankly, get the least.

IV.

Fourth, to achieve school readiness we simply must have family-friendly policies in the workplace, so working parents can spend more time with their children. I'm often invited by corporate leaders to come and speak with them about what they can do to help education. Should they adopt a school? Or should they send them hardware? And I end up saying, "What you should do is remind yourselves that you're employing the parents of school children. It's your obligation to develop policies that allow parents to be available, not just in the workplace, but for parent functions, too."

In yesterday's agrarian society most families lived on farms, and mothers and fathers and their children worked side by side. I grew up helping in a family business.

We struggled during the Depression, and when I went home at night, I worked with my father and my mother and with my brothers. I knew if there was no work, there was no bread. Life for most people during those years was hard, the hours were long, but work life and family life were inextricably intertwined.

Today all of that has changed. Most parents work outside the home, including 60 percent of all mothers with preschool children. And according to the distinguished sociologist at Berkeley, 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 everybody works, and they're just plain tired. After all, the job comes first." I read just a month ago that over the last decade, the workers in this country have been working 10 percent longer, even though their income potential has diminished.

In the new Carnegie report, we insist that school readiness must involve the workplace. We call for flex-time arrangements so that work and family obligations can be better blended. We call for more child care programs in the workplace. We propose parenting days. Why not periodically give parents time off with pay, so mothers and fathers can occasionally spend time with their children in day care centers and in preschools?

And I would like to see the first day of school in this country become a time of national celebration, an occasion for which every working parent sending a child to school for the first time would have a full day off, with pay, to spend at the school. Instead of just dropping the child off, the parent could help reestablish the partnership between the school and the family.

Above all, we propose in our report a national parent leave program so that parents can bond with newborns. Kay has convinced me that the first minutes, hours, and weeks of life between the parents and the child are crucial. Human bonding is essential. Touching and holding matter very much in the emotional development of

children. Yet, somehow we have not allowed that essential reality in human life experience to be reaffirmed in the workplace policies in this country.

In Finland, working women get thirty-five weeks of parental leave with full salary. In Japan, women have the right to a three-month leave at 60 percent pay. In Germany, mothers are eligible for a fully paid leave beginning six weeks before birth and ending six weeks after. I found it disturbing that, on two separate occasions, a modest family leave bill, which would have allowed leave without pay, was vetoed by the President. I celebrate the fact that that bill was one of the first legislative actions by the new Congress and has now been ratified into law.

Sociologist Robert Bellah said, "It might appear at the moment, when 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 . . . depends on the quality of people." I would add, it depends on the quality of our families, too.

V.

Thus far, I have focused on four priorities for school readiness that touch directly on the family: a healthy start, empowered parents, quality preschool, and family-friendly policies in the workplace. However, beyond these four inner rings, there are three "outer rings" in the larger social context that also shape the lives of children.

Surely the most powerful and most pervasive influence in a child's life, beyond the parent, is T.V., which penetrates almost every home and profoundly shapes the environment of our children. The harsh truth is that America's 19 million preschoolers watch television 14 billion hours—I repeat, 14 billion hours—every single year. They are glued to the screen two to three hours every single day. And, yet, what they see is 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, twenty-six acts of violence every single hour. And then we wonder why we have troubled children, failing schools, and violence on the streets. Frankly, I consider it a shocking inditement of our culture that not one of the four major television networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, or FOX—has a single hour of educational programming devoted exclusively to young children.

In response to this neglect, we propose in the Carnegie report that a Ready-to-Learn children's channel be created. After all, we have channels for news, and channels for sports, and channels for weather, and channels for sex, and channels to sell junk jewelry. Is it unthinkable that we would have at least one channel devoted exclusively to the well-being of our children?

There is some good news here. Congress, just last fall, passed what was labeled a "Ready-to-Learn" bill, sponsored successfully by Senator Kennedy, that establishes a preschool programming authorization for PBS stations all across the country.

And just two months ago I received a letter from the president of the Learning Channel telling me that after our report was received and read, his board of directors met and determined that the Learning Channel would devote six hours of noncommercial programming for preschool children every single day. I'm happy to report that the series, called *Ready, Set, Learn*, which runs from 6:00 a.m. to noon, is already on the air. This is clearly public service programming at its very best.

In the summer of 1938, essayist E. B. White said, "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." It seems to me that that challenge is even more urgent now. And I am convinced that if the nation's 19 million

preschoolers are to be well prepared, we simply must have television that enriches rather than degrades.

VI.

Beyond television, which impacts the child's life and penetrates the home, children are also influenced by the neighborhoods that surround them—by the environment they encounter on the street. There was a time when neighborhoods were safe, supportive places for children. I remember playing on the street, kick-the-can and red light and hide-and-seek, and somehow there were always little nooks and crannies for children to crawl in, and no one worried very much.

In recent years we have built cities that are more concerned about cars than kids. During the past fifty years, in the name of urban renewal, we have constructed glitzy banks and glittering new hotels that look like Taj Mahals. We have erected high-rise apartments and office towers that soar into the sky. We've built dazzling shopping centers and high-speed highways, but, frankly, somehow, we have forgotten about the children. For them there is no place to go.

Several years ago at the Carnegie Foundation, as a part of our survey of fifth- and eighth-graders, more than half of these students agreed that "There are not a lot of good places to play in my neighborhood." One eighth-grader spoke for many when she said, "I'm afraid. I'm often scared to go back and forth to school." And in the most improbable place of Madison, Wisconsin, a teacher told a Carnegie researcher, "Many of my children come to school worrying about the violence they may encounter in the neighborhood."

In response to this scandalous neglect, we recommend in the Carnegie report that every city, town, and village recommit itself to building a network of outdoor and even indoor parks. While many cities have used up virtually every inch of ground, they still have lots of unused interior spaces which could be converted into interior

parks for children. Also, let's occasionally close off some city streets to create instant playgrounds for our children. How many streets do we need to build that continue to be congested and polluting while our children increasingly are crowded off the streets and off the sidewalks and back into their homes?

In the Carnegie report, we also propose that all libraries and museums and zoos be well funded and establish school readiness programs for the preschoolers. And we urge that every shopping mall have a ready-to-learn center built in, a place where young children could engage in play and learning. After all, the shopping mall has replaced the early village green. It's where the children go. It's where the teenagers go. It's where families gather.

Further, I'm convinced the time has come to consider replacing the school board with a children's board, to shift the focus from the bureaucracy of education to the needs of children. Let's begin to integrate services within the schools and create, around every school, neighborhoods for learning.

VII.

In addition to a healthy start and empowered parents and quality preschool and all the rest, school readiness will succeed only as we begin to build connections across the generations. Margaret Mead wrote on one occasion that the health of any culture is sustained by at least three generations vitally interacting with one another.

Looking back, the most important mentor in my own life was my Grandfather Boyer, who incidentally lived to be one hundred years old. When he was about ninety-six, I asked Grandfather about the schooling that he had had. "Well," he said, "I went to school about six years, but I went only in the winter when I wasn't needed on the farm," which tells you about school and family life in the 1880s. The point I want to make is that when Grandpa was forty, he moved his little family into the slums of Dayton, Ohio. He spent the next forty years running a city mission, working for the

poor, meeting the needs of those who had been pathetically neglected, teaching them. He taught me, as I observed his life, that to be truly human one must serve.

I remember Grandma Boyer, who was at full height 4 foot 8, standing on the porch of the mission and holding little sack lunches. And four or five big, hulky men would come down from the railroad tracks, "hobos," as we used to call them, standing in front of her with their heads bowed, and holding hat in hand, while she said a prayer on their behalf before she passed out the lunches. These memories are so vivid they will stay with me to my dying day. Yet, for far too many children the intergenerational models have dramatically and tragically diminished.

In America today, we're creating a "horizontal culture," one in which each generation is isolated from the others. We are organizing ourselves by layers. Infants are in nurseries, toddlers are in day care, older children are organized by age levels in the schools—fifth, sixth, seventh—college students go off to college campuses, and adults increasingly spend their time in the workplace or commuting back and forth. And older citizens increasingly are retreating into retirement villages or restricted neighborhoods with covenants in which children are just not welcome. They, too, are living and dying all alone. I find something strange and unhealthy about a retirement village where the average age is eighty and, just as unhealthy, a day care center where the average age is four, where children speak mostly to their peers.

As I look ahead, I see an alarming possibility that we will increasingly have a kind of demographic warfare in public policy. A struggle for money that pits older people against the young. In the battle that has gone on for about a decade, older people are winning and poor children are losing because children remain voiceless in the struggle.

Clearly, the time has come to break up the age ghettos and build intergenerational institutions that bring the old and the young together. For several years my own parents lived in a retirement village where the average age was eighty.

My father said, "No big deal being eighty around this place. You have to be ninety just to get a cake." The good news is they had a day care center there and every morning about fifty three- and four-year olds came trucking in. Every little day care center enrollee had an adopted grandparent, so when I called my father, he wouldn't talk about his aches and pains; he would talk about his little friend who he was sure was going to be governor and perhaps President some day. And when I'd visit him, just like any proud grandparent, he would have the artwork taped on the wall and proudly describe the productions of last week.

There is something magical about bringing the old and young together. That's the way life was intended. We're losing something in a culture in which there is a disconnectedness, in which the continuity of living is not somehow conveyed in a normal and natural way. Through intergenerational connection children can see the courage and the agony of growing older and older people can be 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 young people can gain perspective as well as feel cared for.

In summary, school readiness means a healthy start, quality preschool, empowered parents, a responsive workplace, television that teaches, neighborhoods for learning, and connections across the generation. To put it simply, school readiness means creating in this country a public love of children.

VIII.

But here I should make an absolutely crucial point. While all children must be well prepared for school, it's equally important that all schools be ready for the children. At The Carnegie Foundation, as a follow-up to the ready-to-learn report, we're now completing a sequel that we have tentatively entitled *The Basic School*, which calls for restructuring primary education.

The Basic School would combine kindergarten through grade four. It would engage all parents in what we're calling "a covenant for learning." It would include integrated services. It would include cooperative learning. And in the Basic School, there would be no class with more than fifteen students.

Frankly, I find it ludicrous when people say—and I have actually heard a Secretary of Education say—that class size doesn't matter. I don't think he's been in a classroom in forty years. To say it doesn't matter, especially in the early years which is precisely the time when children need one-on-one attention, is I think not only an insult to children, but an embarrassment to common sense. I've never taught kindergarten or first grade. I did spend time teaching children who were deaf, but I taught only in one-on-one situations. I do have grandchildren though, and frankly, just taking four or five of them to McDonalds is a hugely complicated task. I come home a basket case. Getting on the boots, and taking all the orders, which change every ten seconds, and wiping up the milkshake, and keeping ketchup and mustard off the floor, I mean, these are logistical problems of great magnitude. Now, translate that to the classroom—and many of you have been there. Teachers have to do all these kinds of things, and at the same time they are expected to move the minds and hearts of these children along individually and empower them for learning. It's a far more complicated task. I'm convinced that most school critics couldn't survive one week in the classrooms they so vigorously condemn.

In the Basic School report, we're proposing a new, integrated curriculum based not on the old Carnegie units but on what we call the eight commonalities that bind us all together. We also insist in our report that there should be no national standardized testing of children during the first four years of formal education.

More than thirty years ago, my wife, Kay, and I were called into the school by officials who reported with some anxiousness that one of our children had been declared a "special student," and you know what that means. He was described as a

"special student" because of his performance, we learned, on a single test and because, as another teacher put it, "He's a dreamer." Well, our son did dream, of course. He dreamed about the stars and about places far away. And he dreamed about how he could get out of school, 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 rigidity of the test.

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. He has a wonderful family, four children. He has survived living under conditions that might have totally defeated not only his father but the psychometricians who concluded years ago he couldn't learn.

Recently, I reflected on why the testers were so wrong, and suddenly it 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 didn't have an examination on how to understand emphatically the beauty of another culture.

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 what we urgently need today, in my opinion, is to declare a moratorium on all of this testing mania and devote our energies to the careful development of new assessment procedures that would focus not just on verbal intelligence but on social intelligence and intuitive intelligence, aesthetic and spatial intelligence. We need tests that measure something more than that which matters least.

Finally, if all schools are to be ready for children, we simply must give more dignity and more status to teachers, especially in the early grades. In the end, excellence in education means excellence in teaching, and if this country would give

the status to first grade teachers that we give to full professors, this one act alone would revitalize the nation's schools.

I respectfully suggest to President Clinton that he invite the Teachers of the Year from all fifty states to a formal dinner in the East Room of the White House, and this should be televised prime time. After all, we invite visiting dignitaries from overseas, why not invite the dignitaries from the classrooms from the United States who are themselves the heroes of the nation?

The nation's first education goal, readiness for all, is in my judgment the most important domestic challenge for this country. It is not just Washington's business, it's everybody's business. It's a pledge that America has made not only to itself but most especially to its children. And I can only ask you, what is crueler than making a pledge to children and then walking away? Are we serious about readiness to learn? This isn't just a campaign slogan; this is a moral obligation we have made to the coming generation. And while preparing all children for school, let's also prepare all schools for children, giving top priority in this country to the first ten years of life.

Recently, my good friend Marian Wright Edelman sent me a copy of a prayer, and it occurred to me that, with a bit of paraphrasing, this prayer might be an appropriate way to close my remarks tonight.

The prayer reads, "Dear Lord, we pray for children who like to be tickled, who sneak popsicles before dinner, and who can never find their shoes. And we also 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. Dear Lord, we pray for children who spend all their allowances before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store, who pick at their food, who squirm in church and in the temple, who scream into the phone. And we also pray for children whose nightmares come in the light of day, who rarely see a doctor, 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 our most precious resource. In the end, they're all we have. 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 America together?