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NEUHAUS EDUCATION CENTER LUNCHEON, HOUSTON, TEXAS  
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Introduction by Dr. Joseph McFadden, University of St. Thomas: Such an outpouring of honorary degrees is surely an attestation to the fact that his work is widely acclaimed and widely recognized. Dr. Boyer has served in a number of institutions in a number of capacities - I'll just mention a few. Loyola University, Upland College in California, University of California at Santa Barbara; he served as Chancellor of the State University of New York for seven years where he was responsible for 350,000 students and 64 institutions — put quotation marks around that word "responsible" - right, Dr. Boyer? He also has served as distinguished Fulbright scholar to India and to Chile. Dr. Boyer has been appointed to a number of national committees by three Presidents to national commissions that he has chaired; he has served as U.S. Commissioner of Education where, under his leadership, federal support for education at all levels increased by over 40%. Dr. Boyer has had numerous awards and recognition by his peers throughout his distinguished career, to mention but a few — he was chosen as Educator of the Year by U. S. News & World Report, he received the President's Medal from Tel Aviv University, he received his Distinguished Service Medal from Teachers' College, Columbia University, he received the Horatio Alger Award, he was selected as a leading educator in the nation by his peers, and he was chosen as the Man of the Year in Higher Education in 1987. Dr. Boyer is an author of many works and reports and if you haven't read any of his works, I urge you to go out and read them tomorrow. The thing I like most about Dr. Boyer's works is, you know we have a lot of problems in education, we're all well aware of that; but Dr. Boyer doesn't just throw mud around and identify problems. His books are very concise, very constructive, and for that reason very significant in eliciting action and reform to follow. Dr. Boyer is currently serving as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Ladies and gentlemen, will you join with me in giving Dr. Ernest Boyer a warm, Houston welcome. (Applause)

Dr. Ernest L. Boyer:

Thank you very much for that wonderfully warm introduction. I don't wish to be quarrelsome, but you did forget to mention I was president of my eighth grade class; in fact for two consecutive years I was president of my eighth grade class, so the omission is particularly egregious.

Kay and I are absolutely thrilled to be invited to participate in this Seventh Annual Benefit luncheon for the Neuhaus Education Center. This center, as you've just heard so movingly presented, I must say, serves as a resource for parents, center for teacher

education and renewal; it's dedicated excellence but most especially it recognizes the centrality of language, it's committed to the education of both children and adults, especially children who are very special. This Neuhaus Education Center not only serves this community but I want you to know it has become an inspiration for the nation. It's a model of what we should be doing in every community from coast to coast, and it deserves without question our unqualified support, and I commit - and thank you for the contribution you've made to the nation's children and to the nation's schools.

This afternoon, as you've noticed from the program, I've been asked to talk about quality education, the nation's schools, the nation's children. And it's important to recall that at the very outset America has always had a love affair with education. George Washington declared that knowledge is the surest basis of public happiness; John Jay called knowledge the soul of the republic — I like that poetic word; Horace Mann called the common school the greatest discovery ever made. de Tocqueville, in his celebrated visit to the United States, concluded that the American people appear to be the most enlighten in the world. To put it simply, we have in the United States today more than 85,000 public and private schools, serving more than 45,000,000 students from Bangor, Maine, to Mission Bay, California, and the islands of Hawaii, and I find it remarkable, almost mysteriously remarkable, that all of this has been accomplished, not by a federal directive, not by central ministry of education, but by local citizens who believe deeply in the common school for the common good, perhaps the most audacious, most successful invention in human history.

But with all of our achievements, and they have been substantial, I'm convinced that education in this country is at an historic crossroads, for far too many of our schools, they are not adequately succeeding, and if America hopes to achieve excellence for all, which is the theme of my remarks today, we simply must begin to focus with urgency on early education since I'm convinced that it's within the first years of life that the battle for good schooling will be won or lost.

President Bush in his second national report to the nation announced six goals, the first of which was that by the year 2000 — hold your breath — all children in America will come to school ready to learn. That's a hugely audacious proposition,

and some of my friends were skeptical, but I said what would you expect a President to say? Half the children will come ready to learn? Goals can be fulfilled only when they've been defined, and I'm convinced that if we, as a nation, would truly commit ourselves to school readiness for all children, all of our other goals would, in large measure, be fulfilled. And yet last year, at the Carnegie Foundation, we surveyed 7,000 kindergarten teachers and they reported that based upon their experience last year, 35% of the children coming into kindergarten were linguistically or emotionally or socially deficient, behind the starting gate before they've entered their first classroom. I say it once again — it's in the early years of life where the battle for excellence in education will be won or lost.

For several years, as you know, one of the most successful best sellers in the United States was a very slim little book entitled "*All That I Ever Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten.*" And in that fascinating little essay the author said that in kindergarten he learned don't hit people, put things back where you found them, cookies and milk are good for you, take a nap every afternoon, and when you go out in the world it's always best to hold hands and stick together. Well, putting aside those simple homilies, the truth of that message is absolutely central. It's in the early years when curiosity abounds. This is the time when learning exponentially expands, and above all else, it's in the early years when children are empowered in the use of words. I saw a report from Cambridge, England, just several months ago that established the fact that by the 18th month, children have established a phonetic recognition that carries them all through life. They have already built the linguistic infrastructure around the building blocks of language we call phonemes that become the basis of their later learning. Lewis Thomas said on one occasion that childhood is for language, and now that I'm a grandpa and can observe this process unencumbered by dirty diapers and burpings late at night, I'm absolutely dazzled by the capacity of little children to use words, not only for affection but also as weapons of assault. I mean, their understanding of how to put together those penetrating little verbal pricks that somehow do the trick. When I was growing up in Dayton, Ohio, which is the cultural center of the free world, as you all know, we — well where were you born? — you take what you get. We used to say as little children, sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. I mean what nonsense. I usually say that with tears running down my cheeks, thinking all the time, hit me with a stick

but for goodness sake, stop the words that penetrate so deeply and hurt so long. Little children learn language in the home long before they go to school. Schools don't teach children language; they build on the symbol system already well established. Parents are, in fact, the first and most essential teachers. It's in the home where quality education must begin, and I am increasingly impressed that we will have quality education only as we reestablish the connection between the home and school. And in my judgment, that connection should begin not when children enter kindergarten, but when the child is born. And in a recent Carnegie report we proposed that all schools establish a preschool PTA in which the connectedness will be at the time of birth, and the encouragement to parents would be established in the years preceding formal learning. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all children would grow up on a home environment in which they would be given thoughtful answers to their questions instead of shut up and go to bed. Wouldn't it be wonderful if children grew up on homes in which the bookshelves would be filled with literature instead of knick-knacks and plastic flowers. And wouldn't it be wonderful if all children were read to every single day.

I'm suggesting that if we want better schools, all parents must first give love, then language to their children. And schools must encourage in that empowerment. And to put it simply, I wish as a national policy we would focus on what I call the first ten years of life, believing that if we could somehow develop empowerment conditions for children during the early years, that would establish the foundation for all future learning. I also believe that increasingly someone must coordinate this effort, and the longer it goes, the more I feel that perhaps we should convert our school boards into children's boards who could begin to look at the children instead of the bureaucracy of the school and make transition from pre-birth to the end of elementary education. But to be well prepared for school, all children not only need to be linguistically empowered, they also need to be well nourished, and yet the harsh truth is that in the United States today nearly one out of every four children under the age of six is officially classified as poor. They're undernourished, hugely disadvantaged and I'm convinced that if we continue to neglect the poor children in this country, especially as it relates to basic health, the meeting of nutritional and protein needs even before birth, I believe both our schools and the future of our nation will be imperiled.

Winston Churchill, who had a way with words, said on one occasion there's no finer work for any community than putting milk into little babies. And I would be fascinated as a first step if we could build a national network of children's health clinics all across the country, connected perhaps to schools, just like we have a network of public education. Isn't it reasonable to assume that every child should have access to health care just as they have access to education, since good health necessarily must precede the processes of formal learning.

Beyond good parenting and good health, excellence in education also means preschool programs for every disadvantaged child to help them overcome the deficiencies of nutrition, language, and social deprivation. 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 were educationally at risk, less than 40% of the eligible children are being served. Can we agree that at least by the year 2000, this country will of course improve Head Start but it would also fully fund that program. I'm suggesting that to achieve quality education, all children must be well prepared for school, and if I were to give one priority, working on the priorities of pre-birth to kindergarten should be the centerpiece of our strategy nationwide.

But I also believe that if all children are to be well-prepared for school, all schools must be ready for the children, and I'm increasingly intrigued at the possibility of restructuring the primary grades — kindergarten through grade four — to build on the foundations that importantly must be laid.

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 combine kindergarten through grade four. It would give top priority to language and children from the very first would be reading and listening to stories, and talking about words in a rich and exciting climate the foreign language people like to call "the saturation method." It's my absolute conviction that by the end of grade four every child should be able to read with understanding, write with clarity, and effectively speak and listen, and if we do not establish that as a benchmark for education, I believe the later years cannot accomplish the academic objectives we have in mind.



Further, while speaking of language, let me make one point absolutely clear. I believe the use of words is central, but I also believe the use of number systems is a language too. Unless I am misunderstood I have for years believed that the arts represent a symbol system — in music and dance, in the visual arts. Children learn to communicate their feelings and ideas, sometimes even more effectively by words, so children in the early grades should be encouraged in the symbol system we call the "arts" which they intuitively and powerfully understand. I think the basic school also should provide some support services in health and counseling, that the teachers increasingly are confronting. I believe also we need to have afternoon and summer enrichment programs to help children continue to learn instead of drifting aimlessly on the streets. Several years ago at the Carnegie Foundation we surveyed 5,000 fifth and eighth graders just beyond the basic school. Forty percent of them said they go home every afternoon to an empty house. Sixty percent said they wished they could spend more time with their mothers and their fathers. Two-thirds said they wished they had more things to do, and 30% said their family never sits down together to eat a meal. We are neglecting the children in the early years, and somehow the schools cannot do it all, but they have to recognize the necessary support systems the children urgently require.

And speaking of serving children, I also propose that in the early years there should no class with more than 15 students each. Frankly, I consider it absolutely ludicrous to say that class size doesn't matter. Especially in the early grades when little children need one-on-one attention. I should confess that I have never taught kindergarten or first grade, but I have 11 grandchildren, and occasionally I take four or five of them to McDonald's and I have to confess to you that I come home a basket-case. Just keeping up with their orders which keep changing every 30 seconds. I take out a notepad and then I scratch out and start again, and we end up with the wrong number in the end — keeping mustard off the floor — finding all the coats and boots, I mean I come home and need a rest. And I have not even tried to engage them in an act of learning. I can only say teaching little children is the most demanding and the most heroic work I know, and I'm persuaded 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. (Applause)

And speaking of teachers which I think in the end becomes the centerpiece of excellence, I mean we talk about more rules and regulations, we talk about school choice, we talk about all the periphery when it comes down to the essence of quality and schooling, it's a powerful teacher intimately engaged with a child in a one-on-one relationship, that's where excellence begins and ends. And yet, when we did our report on the American high school several years ago, I concluded the basic problem with teaching in this country is not salary; it's not merit pay; the basic problem is too many students in a classroom, too little time for presentation and consultation with their peers, and frankly, too many mindless interruptions. I don't want to be disrespectful here, but as I visited a classroom I was impressed with the frequency with which the PA system tended to belch out in the midst of the act of learning; it became in a sense a symbol of what's gone wrong with schooling, where frequently procedures transcend the essence of teach-student interaction. I was talking about the public address system to a group of teachers in New Jersey in which I said it often comes on without warning, and afterward a teacher came up to me and said, "Well, that's not true. At my school they go (blow, blow) before the announcement." So, every cloud has a silver lining, I suspect, but — now there are emergencies, I understand that and this doesn't happen in good schools, but it's just a suggestion of how the act of teaching needs to be honored and respected.

Teachers today are being called upon to teach not only the basics but also to help stop the drugs, reduce teenage pregnancy, and eliminate graffiti, and I have observed that while we're always criticizing schools, yet when this country has a serious problem, we turn to education as "Mr. Fix-It" for the nation. We seem not to do it right, but whenever we're in crisis they are the only place to turn, and increasingly I'm convinced that the family is perhaps a more imperiled institution than the school; that the healthcare system is a more imperiled institution than the school; the legal system is a more imperiled institution than the school; and increasingly the school is trying to pick up the pieces of other systems that are breaking down. And I think, frankly, that most school critics could not survive one week in the classrooms they so vigorously condemn.

Several years ago I couldn't sleep and instead of counting sheep I counted all the teachers that I've had. There were, I confess, a few nightmares in the bunch, but I

also recall some outstanding teachers who changed my life forever. During the past ten years I've referred to these teachers, I know, a thousand times. But I do it to make a very central point — that while we're often confused by the school reform movement, at the heart of all of this there stands a teacher who shapes a life, and if we would in this country give the kind of dignity and status to teachers they deserve, that's what brings quality to education.

I remember a Professor Joseph Smith, a literature professor at the University. It was a seminar in Shakespeare, and he used to ask us to read the text but then in class, quite literally, he read King Lear and Macbeth aloud, in class, and as I heard that unbelievably powerful literature come to life through the evocative verbalization of my professor, I understood that literature is not something of the past, it's an inquiry into the deepest yearnings of the human spirit. I remember Mr. Whitley, our high school History teacher, who stopped me after class one day and said, "Ernest, you're doing fairly well in History; you keep this up you just might be a student." That was highest academic accolade I'd had. I ran home that night — you mean I'm not a football player or a cowboy — I'm something Mr. Whitley called a student. It rearranged my thinking when I was unclearest as to who I was or what I might become. I remember my first grade teacher, Miss Rice, who the first day of school said "Good morning, class, today we learn to read." We spent all day on four words. I go to school. We traced them, we sang them, and, God forgive her, we even prayed them. She had worked out this little prayer. "Thank you, God, I go to school." Being tracked down by the Supreme Court even as I speak. Incidentally, I heard on that delicate subject that the one prayer in school that's acceptable to all faiths is, "Dear God, don't let her call on me today."



## A Prayer For Children

Loving God,

We pray for our children  
who put chocolate fingers everywhere,  
who like to be tickled,  
who stomp in puddles,  
who sneak popsicles before supper,  
who make mistakes in math homework,  
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those  
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,  
who can't bound down streets in a new pair of sneakers,  
who never "counted potatoes",  
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead,  
who never go to the circus,  
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children  
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,  
who sleep with the dog,  
who hug us in a hurry and forget lunch money,  
who cover themselves in Band-aids and sing off-key,  
who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink,  
who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those  
who never get dessert,  
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,  
who can't find any bread,  
who don't have any rooms to clean up,

whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,  
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children  
who spend their allowance before Tuesday,  
who pick at food,  
who like ghost stories,  
who shove dirty clothes under the bed,  
and never rinse out the tub,  
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,  
who squirm in church,  
whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those  
whose nightmares come in the daytime,  
who will eat anything,  
who have never seen a dentist,  
who aren't spoiled by anybody,  
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,  
who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for those  
who must, for those we never give up on and for those  
who don't get a second chance.

For those we smother with love and for those who will  
grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it.